Memoirs of War

Võ Nguyên Giáp

Fighting under Siege

THẾ GIỚI PUBLISHERS

FIGHTING UNDER SIEGE

General Võ Nguyên Giáp

FIGHTING UNDER SIEGE

Reminiscences

(As recorded by Hữu Mai)

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GENERAL VÕ NGUYÊN GIÁP

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PREFACE

Nguyễn Ái Quốc[1]

The Việt Minh

The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam

During the last decades of the 20th century, historical developments happened in quick succession. After more than seventy years of existence, the Soviet Union, the cradle and bulwark of socialism, unexpectedly collapsed in a matter of days and the Cold War ended. Following the Gulf War in 1991, a new world order and era of peace was declared. Immediately thereafter, however, ethnic conflicts broke out one after another. Powerful political leaders one day were deposed the next. Rapid advances in information technologies and the biological sciences foretold the beginning of a new stage of human development. Some well-known scientists even predicted the creation of a heaven on earth by the beginning of the 21st century. Instead, anxiety is now general, not only about the increasing tensions and inequalities between people but also about life on the planet as overexploitation and environmental disasters deteriorate land and sea, and even the ozone layer.

In the face of such turbulent change, there is a need as well as a natural tendency to reassess our values. Permanent values must be reaffirmed, while other values must change. Shaping new values is not easy. Change cannot be disassociated from our nation's history and past successes and failures. By thinking over what I have experienced and witnessed, I hope to contribute to the renovation campaign now being carried out by the Communist Party and the

1. i.e. President Hồ Chí Minh

people of Việt Nam. I have set for myself a modest objective: to say only what is really necessary to say.

1. Nguyễn ái Quốc

I have related in my book, *Coming from the People*[2] the impressions I had when I met Nguyễn Ái Quốc for the first time in Cui Ho, Yunnan, China, over half a century ago. Uncle Hồ was moderate in his words and actions. He never showed excessive emotion, even when joyful. Sadness and anxiety were seldom visible on his face, but beneath his calm demeanor lay deep feelings.

In all the years I worked with him, I rarely heard him speak about the three decades he spent abroad seeking a way for Vietnam to achieve independence. President Hồ Chí Minh's biography about this period contains many blank spaces, which recently discovered facts and documents are helping us to fill in.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc came to proletarian internationalism in a different way from that of many of his contemporaries. In the beginning he had relatively little knowledge about the 2nd and the 3rd Communist International Congresses. "I followed the International which stood for the liberation of colonies." Lenin's *Thesis on Problems of Peoples and Colonies* pointed out that for colonial peoples to be liberated, there first had to be a revolution of the working classes. Nguyễn Ái Quốc joined the Communist Party in order to save his own people.

As early as 1921, he wrote in the Communist Review:[3] "When hundreds of millions of ill-treated and oppressed Asians stand up to liberate themselves from the odious exploitation of greedy colonialists, they will form a gigantic force capable of helping their

2. General Võ Nguyên Giáp's memoirs in Vietnamese. Quân đội Nhân dân Publishing House, Hà Nội
3. Of the French Communist Party

brothers in the West secure complete liberation by destroying one of the conditions for the existence of capitalism, namely, imperialism." At about the same time, he drafted the Declaration of the Union of Colonies, which read in part: "What should you do to get freedom? Applying Karl Marx's theory, let me tell you, brothers, that your liberation can be achieved only by your own efforts." This affirmation of the people's own power is not found in the documents of the Communist International. Until 1928, at its 6th Congress, the Communist International clung to the view that colonial peoples could only be liberated after the proletarian revolution in the metropolitan country was successful.

Even at this time, Nguyễn Ái Quốc's viewpoint was a nuanced one. At its foundation, however, was his patriotism and love for the Vietnamese people as well as his belief in their spirit of self-reliance.

As we know, Nguyễn Ái Quốc's activities were all aimed at the liberation of his country as well as the emancipation of other colonial nations. Today, we realize that some of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's political views were intellectual discoveries of historical importance. But at that time, although Nguyễn Ái Quốc was not entirely alone, his ideas met with no small difficulties. The platform of the Communist Party that he drafted as well as the name he had chosen for it were not accepted. When the delegation of the Indochinese Communist Party attended the 7th Communist International, Nguyễn Ái Quốc was only present during the last days of the Congress in the capacity of a consultative delegate. For a time, he did the mundane work of maintaining a liaison between the leadership abroad and his comrades operating in the country. These facts, however, did not prevent him from becoming an outstanding activist in the international communist movement and of continuing on his path towards national liberation.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc opened his platform for the establishment of the Association of Revolutionary Youths with the words: "Let us

liberate ourselves with our own strength." He always paid great attention to Việt Nam's youth because he recognized that they were the future of the nation. In early 1930, he merged all communist organizations in the country into the Communist Party of Việt Nam (CPV). In subsequent years, the role he played in the Vietnamese revolutionary movement was often unclear. Once, for example, it was reported that he was in an imperialist jail. Another time it was reported that he had died of tuberculosis. The activities of the Party also subsided after the failure of the Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh insurrection. We regarded Nguyễn Ái Quốc as a brilliant example, a legendary personality. The revolutionary activist reemerged in 1935 when the Popular Front came to power in France. In 1938, Nguyễn Ái Quốc resumed contact with the revolutionary movement in Việt Nam. Engaged in journalism in Hà Nội, I was one of several people who received Nguyễn Ái Quốc's articles under different pen names. His reappearance was a great encouragement for us. In May 1940, before I left the country, Hoàng Văn Thụ[4] told me that I might meet Nguyễn Ái Quốc abroad. I believed then that he was to play a decisive role in shaping the destiny of our nation.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc was then fifty years old. In appearance, he looked quite different from the photographs taken when he was young. He had grown a beard and his forehead now appeared larger, but his beard and hair were still black. His eyes were particularly brilliant, which brightened his calm, rather quiet face. He showed me his name card, which read: "Hồ Chí Minh, correspondent of the Tân Thanh Daily." I had no idea that this was the name he had chosen to use from then on.

In 1923, Osip Mandelstam, a Soviet poet, remarked: "From Nguyễn Ái Quốc radiates a culture, not a European culture,

4. A Vietnamese revolutionary activist of the Tày ethnic group, contemporary with general Võ Nguyên Giáp. He was sentenced to death by the French colonialists, before the August 1945 Revolution

perhaps a future one." Many Westerners, who met President Hồ Chí Minh after the August 1945 Revolution, described him as having the bearing of an Eastern philosopher. I would like to be more precise. Uncle Hồ had the manner of a person coming from a poor scholar's family in Việt Nam where other Asian, including Indian and Chinese, cultural currents had long ago merged with the national culture. During his years of extensive travel in Western countries, he wrote polemics in French. When put in custody in China, he composed poems in Hán characters to express his feelings. Yet after living thirty years far away from his native land and traveling in twenty-seven countries on four continents, he still preserved his Vietnamese character. He often referred to Confucius, the great ethicist of the East, although he did not share the ideas of many disciples of Confucius. He lived a frugal life and liked to be surrounded by nature, among trees and flowers like Lao-tzu. He admired the teachings of this secluded philosopher on the importance of knowledge and wisdom, yet differed from him in that Uncle Hồ could not stand for "non-action" and merely letting things develop according to the changes of the sky and the earth.

Uncle Hồ embodied the meeting of the ancient East and the modern West, between Vietnamese patriotism and love for the people and the October Revolution led by Lenin. Patriot Nguyễn Ái Quốc took from Marxism the doctrine that only through the decisive leadership of a vanguard party can the working classes be emancipated and the ruling class overthrown. Communist Nguyễn Ái Quốc preserved the kindness and altruism that stemmed from the Vietnamese belief that people should be treated with compassion "as deep for others as for oneself," and Oriental ethical teachings about mercy, and universal love that considered "the people of five continents and four oceans members of the same family." He skillfully combined Marxist dialectics in combination with the principle of the Book of Changes of the East (I Ching) about using "the immutable to cope with ten thousand changes."

As an old saying goes: "At the age of 50, one knows the Heaven's mandate." This was true of Uncle Hồ. When he met with us in Cui Ho, he was fully prepared for the long march for national liberation.

2. The Việt Minh

When I was in Guilin,[5] as requested by Hoàng Văn Thụ, I asked Uncle Hồ whether we should establish the "League of Oppressed Peoples in Asia." He answered: "Conditions are not ripe for doing it.... Now it is more important to have an organization which assembles fighters for our national independence. Such a broad-based organization should be named 'League for the Independence of Việt Nam' or 'Việt Minh' for short." At first this name sounded odd, but very soon it entered into the history of Việt Nam and has become known all over the world.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc was committed to the idea that strength goes hand in hand with the people. Once enlightened and organized, the people would have a boundless strength. This was a lesson he had drawn from the indomitable fighting spirit of our nation in the past and directly from the October Revolution.[6] He was thinking all the time about gathering our forces, about broadly assembling the poor and oppressed, with workers and peasants as the core. The *La Paria* newspaper, the Union of Colonies, the Union of Oppressed People, the Union of Oppressed Peoples in Asia, and so on were all organized by Nguyễn Ái Quốc. They were all strongly imprinted with national features, but also impregnated with internationalism. The fate of Việt Nam was closely associated with that of other colonial peoples. We could not wait. It was time for colonial peoples to unite and overthrow the ruling colonialists. Việt Nam

5. A city in Guangxi province, China
6. The Russian 1917 Revolution

would contribute to the liberation of others, and the emancipation of mankind by its example.

During the first decades of the 20th century, Nguyễn Ái Quốc's ideas were quite new. Few people believed that colonial peoples could liberate themselves when even the proletarian class in metropolitan countries had not. However, Nguyễn Ái Quốc was persistent and determined to carry out his plan for his country even though he knew it would not be easy. In 1940, France surrendered to fascist Germany. The Soviet Union had to concentrate all its efforts on fighting Fascism. The time was ripe for Nguyễn Ái Quốc to try his way of national salvation.

In early 1941, Uncle Hồ went to live in the Pắc Bó grotto.[7] The Communist Party of Việt Nam (CPV) had just suffered great losses after the failed Nam Kỳ insurrection. Many Party leaders were killed or arrested. The 8th Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPV presided over by Uncle Hồ considered the question of national liberation the first item on the agenda. The Central Committee decided to put aside mottos about the agrarian revolution and to found the Việt Minh to lead all social classes in the struggle against the French. Its founding on 19 May 1941 coincided with President Hồ Chí Minh's birthday, which was announced for the first time in 1946.

The Việt Minh showed Hồ Chí Minh's creative talent. It created the opportunity for workers — the vanguards of the proletarian class — in a colonial country to mobilize the whole people to rise up and throw off the yoke of imperialism which until then had met only with success.

Việt Minh implies the main ideas of President Hồ Chí Minh. The clear objective was to achieve national cohesion. Unity was both the goal and the driving force of the revolution, captured in

7. A place in the northernmost Cao Bằng province, Việt Nam

the famous motto 'Solidarity, solidarity, great solidarity! Success, success, great success!' Solidarity here meant national solidarity, class solidarity, and international solidarity. Hồ Chí Minh never underestimated the struggle that would be necessary to achieve solidarity. He did not view it as a short-term tactic, rather it was a part of a long-term strategy. This was the nature of the patriotic communism of Hồ Chí Minh.

From the Pắc Bó grotto, from remote and isolated villages, through classes with just six or seven students, through short articles published on the *Việt Lập* paper, the ten policies of the Việt Minh resounded in the cities and countryside like a clarion call. People come first, rifles come after. With the support of the people, we can achieve everything. Self-defence militias and guerillas acquired and made weapons and found ways to fight and destroy enemy posts. They quickly became the core armed forces in the general uprising of the people to throw off the colonial yoke.

The Communist Party succeeded in rapidly assembling people from all social strata because its message and goal matched their burning aspirations. The Party acting through the Việt Minh increasingly consolidated its leadership thanks largely to its members who feared no hardship, or sacrifice, and who constantly took the lead in all difficult tasks.

Marxism–Leninism in Việt Nam after Hồ Chí Minh's return home took on specifically Vietnamese features, with regard to its objectives and organization. National traditions and Hồ Chí Minh's love for the Vietnamese people and his patriotism were incorporated into it.

The Việt Minh's ideas about creating a national united front were not only effective during the revolutionary for national liberation, they also played a decisive role in the later building of a socialist society.

3. The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam

The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRVN) came into being in the wink of the historical eye. Between 13 and 28 August 1945, between the announcement of Japan's surrender by Emperor Hirohito to the entry of Allied forces into North Việt Nam, Việt Nam declared itself a unified nation. Had Việt Nam missed this opportunity, the country would have remained divided into three parts: Bắc Kỳ, Trung Kỳ, and Nam Kỳ within French Indochina. The North would have had a pro-Chiang Kai Shek government. In the South, France would have restored its ruling power. The Vietnamese people's struggle for independence would have been considered mere "Communist-led rebel activities!" Who knows where the historical current would have flowed, and at what speed?

The newly-elected government through its election by the people was a government of national solidarity. The new State included not only representatives of revolutionary organizations but also representatives from other political parties and leanings, including patriotic scholars such as Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, members of the former regime like Phan Kế Toại, and Bùi Bằng Đoàn. New "citizen Vĩnh Thụy" (the freshly abdicated emperor Bảo Đại) and archbishop Lê Hữu Từ acted as advisers to the government. For some time, the Vietnamese National Assembly reserved as many as one fifth of its seats for members of two pro-Chiang Kai Shek parties, the Nationalist Party of Việt Nam and the Alliance of Vietnamese Revolutionaries. These were not filled through election, however, since these parties would have had no hope of being elected in the free general election. President Hồ Chí Minh sincerely stood for permanent solidarity with people of many political tendencies as long as they loved the country and contributed to its recovery and to the independence, freedom, and happiness of its people. Even though Vĩnh Thụy had left Việt Nam for Hong Kong prior to the outbreak of the

resistance war, Uncle Hồ still sent an envoy to invite him back to Việt Nam to participate.

In the new government, all citizens, regardless of their sex, nationality, religion or wealth were granted equal rights and obligations. Taxes of all kinds were reduced for poor peasants who made up a majority of the population. For the first time, working people became the masters of their destiny. President Hồ Chí Minh appealed to men of talent to contribute to the building of a new nation. The emerging corruption and abuse of power by "revolutionary mandarins" was condemned and opposed. Government actions to increase productivity put an end to a horrendous famine. The national army and the militia, which had proved their spirit and strength on the battlefield, now helped build confidence in the new regime.

After fulfilling its historic mission of leading a successful general insurrection, the Việt Minh joined with other political and social organizations to form a broad united front, the new Union of the People of Việt Nam.

Although the new regime had just been born and its new administration was young, it stood firm in the face of dangerous trials. In the North, 200,000 of Chiang Kai Shek's troops failed to help their Vietnamese agents overthrow its administration. In the South, tens of thousands of French troops equipped with modern weapons became mired in hopeless pacification campaigns in the countryside outside the cities.

The DRVN was not then formally recognized by any nation in the world but few could deny its *de facto* existence. Upon entering the North, Chiang Kai Shek's troops had contacted Hồ Chí Minh's government. The 6 March 1946 Accord, the first international agreement made by the new Việt Nam, was signed between our government and representatives of the French government. The national flag of Việt Nam was flown in Paris, on the Suez canal, and on the large seas connecting Việt Nam and France.

Looking back at more than half a century that included so many upheavals, we can begin to realize what President Hồ Chí Minh achieved in the resurrection of Việt Nam and in building a solid foundation upon which the Vietnamese nation could advance to an even brighter future. The *Declaration of Independence* and the first Constitution of Việt Nam still maintain value on all fundamental issues.

We can understand why the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese voluntarily fought for the existence of the DRVN and for its objectives of independence, freedom, and happiness.

The emergence of the DRVN was an indispensable factor in ensuring victory in two major wars for national survival.

4. Peace or war

In 1985, a French scientist came to Hà Nội and asked me a question posed by the daughter of the late Marshal Leclerc, "Could the war between Việt Nam and France have been avoided?" The Leclerc family and the De Lattre de Tassigny family (The families of two commanders-in-chief of the French expeditionary corps in Indochina) were both victims of war. Each family had lost a son on the battlefields of Việt Nam. The two suffering mothers, dressed in mourning clothes, met Prime Minister Pleven and asked him why this unjust war was so unreasonably protracted?

Decades after the outbreak of the war, historians still debate who triggered it? In the late 1980s, Stein Tonnesson, a young Norwegian historian, and Philippe Devillers, a French historian, both arrived at the same conclusion: Valluy (commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary corps) and Pignon[8] attempted to reestablish French rule in the Indochinese peninsula by any means possible once Leon Blum became Head of the French government. Even if Việt Nam

8. French High Commissioner in Việt Nam

refused to provide a "pretext," they were determined to retake Việt Nam by force. So the underlying cause of the events on the night of 19 December 1946[9] is clear. Both historians, however, are still puzzled about why the army and the militia of Việt Nam were the first to open fire, even though President Hồ Chí Minh did all he could to avoid war.

Once started, President Hồ Chí Minh realized that the situation was critical. The French would soon recover from their initial shock and Việt Nam would have to cope with reconquest. He did his utmost to spare the nation a resistance war that would surely cause tremendous suffering.

Many people still think that the Indochina war, the longest of the century, broke out on 19 December 1946. In fact it started 15 months earlier, on 23 September 1945 when French troops opened fire in order to recapture Saigon. The war then rapidly spread all over the South and expanded to northwest Việt Nam, Laos, and Cambodia.

In early October 1945, units of Việt Nam's Liberation Army from Cao Bằng (the northernmost province) to the ancient capital of Huế and Quảng Ngãi province in Central Việt Nam, set out to fight in the South. Then came the westward advance of Vietnamese troops. Việt Nam had now started its resistance against the French war of aggression.

Under the 6 March 1946 Preliminary Accord between Việt Nam and France, independent Việt Nam was still a "free state" within the French Union. A referendum in South Việt Nam to decide whether this part of Việt Nam would belong to Việt Nam or France had also been agreed to. On 14 September 1946, the Modus Vivendi was signed in Paris. D'Argenlieu, French High Commissioner in

9. The day when President Hồ Chí Minh made an appeal to the whole Vietnamese people, urging then to fight against the French colonialists

Indochina, had set up the "Nam Kỳ quốc" (the separate country of Nam Kỳ) and had sent troops to occupy the Central Highlands and Tây Bắc (the northwest region) of Việt Nam, which amounted to another concession of Việt Nam. With the Modus Vivendi, Việt Nam's intention was only to obtain a ceasefire in Nam Bộ and certain rights to democratic liberties for the population living in French-occupied zones.

In mid-April 1946, I attended the preliminary negotiations in Đà Lạt between Việt Nam and France. There I met D'Argenlieu. By the end of the conference, I felt that war would be difficult to avoid. The French did not hide their resolute intention of restoring their rule in Indochina. During the Fontainebleau negotiations in Paris, French encroachments and provocations occurred continuously in Việt Nam. We had no other way to respond except to build up our forces and prepare for a resistance war.

In the second half of November 1946, French troops brazenly occupied Hải Phòng, the only seaport in North Việt Nam, and Lạng Sơn, a border province.

From early December, tensions increased daily in Hà Nội. French tanks and armored vehicles rumbled through the streets. Soldiers wearing red or black berets kidnapped government officials and citizens, shot at tramways, and more. What had happened in Hải Phòng could occur again at any moment. We had to take measures to defend ourselves. The population was told to evacuate Hà Nội and barricades were built around the quarters adjoining the French garrisons. Provocations from French troops then entered a new phase. They pounded the barricades, shot at the Vietnamese soldiers protecting the Yên Phụ power plant, and massacred the residents of Hàng Bún and Yên Ninh streets in Hà Nội.

Uncle Hồ was determined to avoid expanding the war or at least to postpone it. He appealed many times to the French government,

its National Assembly and Prime Minister. He also met with leaders of the French army in Hà Nội in order to avoid war. Vietnamese soldiers and militiamen were ordered to remain calm and to avoid reacting to French provocations.

On 13 December 1946, the Ministry of Defence – Military High Command convened a meeting of regional commanders north of the 4th military zone to review the situation and to draw up a tactical plan in case the French started a war. Rules of engagement were issued separately to each zonal commander.

On 16 December 1946, Morlière, the commander of French troops in north Indochina, sent two ultimatums to the Vietnamese government, stating: "French forces will establish security and order in Hà Nội on the morning of 20 December 1946 at the latest."

All their provocations, population massacres, and killing of Vietnamese soldiers had not given the French the pretext they expected and now they were forced to openly state their determination to carry out their war plan! In Hải Phòng on 23 January 1946, only three hours after the French sending a letter to the City's Administrative Committee demanding the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese military forces, the French opened fire and seized the city. This occurred even though the Committee chairperson responded, asking for time to seek Hà Nội's answer.

The capital of Việt Nam could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands. It was the new government's historical responsibility not to let the military and civilian populations of Việt Nam's cities and towns again become victims of a foreign takeover. A confidential circular dated 10 April 1946 issued by Valluy to the military units garrisoned in Hải Phòng, instructed them to prepare an action plan to smash the resistance and rapidly control the city as soon as an opportunity arose. This plan, called "the scenario of the coup d'etat," is exactly what French troops did in Hải Phòng and Lạng Sơn.

On the morning of 19 December 1946, after a last exchange of views in Vạn Phúc, Hà Đông, the Standing Central Committee of the CPV sent a message to its troops: "The French have issued an ultimatum demanding the disarmament of our soldiers, militia, and police. The government has rejected this ultimatum. Consequently, within the next 24 hours, at the latest, the French aggressors will surely open fire. The instruction of the Central Committee is to keep ready."

In the afternoon of the 19th, the General Staff sent a message to military zones 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12, and to Đà Nẵng ordering them to open fire on the French at 20:00 hours.

We had less than a day to prepare the country for a new and violent phase of the resistence. But perhaps, the order to open fire at 20:00 hours was already too late! Morlière had informed his staff that "at the latest, on the morning of 20 December 1946, French troops would disarm the Việt Minh armed forces in Hà Nội." The French considered it their right to carry out their plans at any moment after the ultimatum was sent.

Researchers knowledgeable about the Indochina War have pointed out that Valluy and Pignon, who headed the French expeditionary corps, wanted to expand the war at once in order to present the Blum government with a *fait accompli*. D'Argenlieu, the highest leader within the French expeditionary corps, spoke softly when contacting the Vietnamese, but was adamant during negotiations. This priest in military uniform understood little about the actual conditions of the times and had none of the philanthropy of Christ. We should not forget that D'Argenlieu was a faithful follower of De Gaulle who was determined to use force to restore and continue to exploit France's former colonies in order to retrieve the French economy which had been exhausted during the war. Only after his later failure in Algeria, did De Gaulle acknowledge that he had been wrong. Truman, too, who had just replaced Roosevelt in leading the free world, was notorious for his anti-communism.

At the time, some French authorities realized the high risks of engaging in a new war of aggression. Their voices, however, were calls in the wilderness. Imperialists still believed that they could easily vanquish weak peoples through military force.

Once the flames of war had been fanned, it was not impossible to extinguish them. After 19 December 1946, President Hồ Chí Minh repeatedly called on the French government to reach a settlement with Việt Nam. Throughout the war he never missed an opportunity to seek peace between the two nations. Yet the flames of war cannot be extinguished by only one side.

The events of 19 and 20 December 1946, as well as the Việt Nam War, upon reflection were inevitable.

The fierce confrontation between the Vietnamese nation, the DRVN regime, and its aggressor lasted five years. Because of time limits and my working conditions in writing this book, however, I will not be able to cover all aspects of the story. Instead, I will focus on the major military issues, but even here I will not be able to mention all the achievements and exploits of various battlefields.

I hope that further research on the problems encountered in different regions and battles during this period will someday receive the attention they deserve.

CHAPTER I

19 DECEMBER 1946

"We want peace, so we have had to make concessions. But the more we concede, the more the French colonialists take advantage of us because they are determined to conquer our country once again.

No! We would rather sacrifice all than lose our country. Never shall we be enslaved!

Dear compatriots!

Let's stand up!"

(Appeal to the whole people to join the resistance by President Hồ Chí Minh)

1

When reviewing the situation afterwards, we realized that during the first days of the resistance, we managed to do what many classic military theorists deemed impossible.

As a result of the agreement reached between the allied powers with the concurrence of our government, French forces were allowed to enter North Việt Nam to keep security, replacing Chiang Kai Shek's troops who returned to China. Units of the French expeditionary corps entered Hà Nội, and all large cities and towns, occupying important military positions such as airfields and seaports.

The first clash between Uncle Hồ's armed forces and the French expeditionary corps broke out in Hà Nội and later on, in other cities and towns.

Throughout Việt Nam's long history of struggle to defend itself against invaders, beginning with the Trưng sisters in 40 A.D., no fighting against foreign forces had taken place in the capital and major cities. Such fighting rarely took place in Thăng Long, the ancient capital of Việt Nam. During the 13th century, under the Trần dynasty,[10] the Vietnamese repelled the Yuan-Mongols three times. Although the military equipment used on both sides was much the same, the French was as strong as water and fire, forcing the Vietnamese to temporarily withdraw from the capital and find more strategically situated places from which to fight back. In the 19th century, although the Hà Nội Citadel held 5,000 troops, it was rapidly captured first in 1873 by 200 French soldiers and again in 1882, by 500 French troops. When teaching history in Thăng Long School, I often thought about the reasons for this.[11]

In revolutionary wars, there never had been a victory of weak local armed forces over a regular army in an urban area.

History held no precedents for our coming battles and later victory. We had to find our own ways to fight based on scant experience drawn from the battle of Thái Nguyên during the General Insurrection, from the short and fierce fighting in Sài Gòn (Saigon) and Nha Trang, and most recently from fighting the French in Hải Phòng. We had to prepare battle plans for the army and for civilians who, for the first time, would be faced by an enemy who was several times stronger.

We had considered the need to defend Hà Nội and other cities early on.

10. A feudal dynasty in Việt Nam, lasting from 1225 to 1400
11. A secondary school where general Võ Nguyên Giáp used to teach

On 19 October 1946, after the Fontainebleau negotiations failed to yield results, the Conference of Central-level Cadres concluded that sooner or later, the French would attack us, and that we must be vigilant and ready. The General Staff was instructed to study three problems: fighting in urban areas with Hà Nội as a primary target, how to deal with tanks and armoured vehicles, and how to destroy roads. A research team studying these issues concluded that the key question was how to fight and defend the cities. I regularly attended its discussions. When Văn Tiến Dũng[12] was appointed by the Communist Party as head of the Ministry's Political Department, I consulted with him about how to organize and carry out our work in case the war expanded all over the country.

On 16 September 1946, Uncle Hồ left the port of Toulon to return to Việt Nam. On 16 October, he met D'Argenlieu in Cam Ranh Bay.[13] The Agreement on Ceasefire contained in the 14 September Modus Vivendi was not observed in Nam Bộ (South Vietnam). On 5 November, he wrote his famous notes "The Current Pressing Tasks" which we learned about only later. In mid-November, he asked me:

"If the war cannot be avoided, how long can we defend Hà Nội?"

"We must strive to keep it for at least 15 days," I replied. "The General Staff has prepared a tactical plan for the capital city in case of hostilities."

After the occupation of Hải Phòng on 23 November, the Standing Central Committee concluded that the French would certainly provoke hostilities in the capital and that countrywide war was inevitable. Uncle Hồ and the Committee then passed a resolution which read: "Should the French repeat what they did in Hải Phòng, the whole country will stand up to oppose their

12. A four-star general of the People's Army of Việt Nam
13. A seaport in Khánh Hòa province, central Việt Nam

aggression. In the beginning, we will try to wear down the enemy, destroy part of its forces, and preserve our strength by pinning down and isolating the French troops for as long as possible in each city, thereby giving our people time to prepare for a lasting war." Uncle Hồ stressed, "The French will attack us as soon as they have an opportunity. We should try by every means possible to avoid the war. We should not allow ourselves to be provoked, thus giving them a pretext for attacking us. In the city, each street must be turned into a trench. In the countryside, each village must be turned into a fortress. Our resistance will involve the whole population, in all fields, in a lasting war."

After the conference, the general staff and command of the Hà Nội battlefront were entrusted with preparing a tactical plan for the country and for Hà Nội. I was entrusted by the Party to take charge of military affairs. I met frequently with the people, government agencies, and party cadres in the capital in order to explain the Standing Central Committee's plan for a resistance war.

Late in November, the Committee held a conference with the Military Command and the Defence Committee of the newly set up special zone of Hà Nội (Zone 11). Nguyễn Quyết, Vương Thừa Vũ, Lâm·Kính, Quang Trung, and Lê Quảng Ba successively became commanders of the National Guards of Hà Nội following the successful August Revolution. Lê Trung Toản was placed in charge of Hà Nội's self-defence corps and militia. After Nguyễn Quyết and Quang Trung left for South Việt Nam and Lê Quảng Ba left for Zone 12, Vương Thừa Vũ became chief commander and Trần Độ the political commissar of the Hà Nội war zone. Also present in the Great Hall of Bắc Bộ Phủ (its present-day banquet room), were Trần Quốc Hoàn, envoy of the Central Committee, and Nguyễn Văn Trân, chairman of the Defence Committee.

I briefly described to them the critical situation we faced given French determination to recapture Việt Nam and discussed Uncle Hồ's and the Standing Central Committee's plan for defending the

capital. First, we must decimate and destroy part of the French forces and keep them in Hà Nội and other cities for as long as possible, in order to give our people time to mobilize for war. Second, along with destroying their forces, we must do everything we can to preserve our own strength by closely monitoring the situation on the front so that whenever possible, we can remove our forces from the cities so that they can join the army and people in the countryside in waging a long resistance war. Third, Hà Nội must set an example of bravery and creativeness for the whole country. Tight cohesion must be created between the army, the self-defence corps, and the police. Moreover, the capital city must show solidarity and assist those Vietnamese and foreign residents who cannot evacuate the city in time.

Given the nature of the enemy and our own capabilities, I pointed out that our tactics would "consist mainly of using small forces, taking advantage of the terrain in each city quarter, using solidly-built houses, building barricades, and obstacles in the streets, and attacking the enemy in every way possible. In brief, we must avoid deploying large forces in large battles and instead cause difficulty and embarrassment to the enemy by means of many small victories..."

2

At that time, there were 90,000 French troops in Indochina. We had about 82,000 combatants in the whole country. Despite the small numerical discrepancy, the difference in the organization, equipment, technical expertise was great — it marked an epochal backwardness on our part.

The French expeditionary corps was comprised of professional soldiers organized into infantry, tanks, artillery, air force, and navy units. The French forces had just been victorious in the Second World War. They had the West's latest military equipment. Only the use of the Thompson submachine guns had demoralized Japan's proud

soldiers on the Solomon islands. As for the Vietnamese army, it was composed only of infantrymen, most of whom were citizens who had just put on a military uniform. Their equipment was poor. Each unit had at most one third of its soldiers equipped with obsolete rifles of all types and little ammunition. Each regiment had three or four light or heavy machine guns and some mortars. The units who had been trained in the anti-Japanese war in Việt Bắc had either left for the South or been appointed commanders of these newly organized units. Since they had shared Việt Nam's earlier defense with French troops, our soldiers were not technically well trained. The majority had no experience in firing real bullets. Our army was organized into regiments, with each regiment having a zone of operation that covered two or three provinces. Besides companies of guards, the High Command and zones had no main force (large fighting) units.

Under the 6 March 1946 Preliminary Accord, France was allowed to move 15,000 troops into North Việt Nam, from Đà Nẵng north. They illegally increased this number to 30,000 including units of elite foreign legion troops and a large contingent of technical units. In cities like Nam Định, Hải Dương and Huế, there was one battalion of French troops, even two in Đà Nẵng. In Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang, the French had one battalion; in Vinh they had only one platoon.

French troops were concentrated in Hà Nội, including one regiment of infantrymen, one regiment of tanks and armoured vehicles, one battalion of artillery, a contingent of commandos, a contingent of parachutists, and the air force and navy. All told there were 6,500 men. It should be noted, however, that 7,000 French residents of Hà Nội were also armed.

The Việt Minh forces in Hà Nội comprised six battalions of national guards, or 2,515 men, and about 8,000 men in the self-defence corps which included the national salvation self-defence corps, the self-defence guards of factories, those of the Hoàng Diệu citadel, and a contingent of vanguard police. The High

Command gave instructions to provide Hà Nội with more fighting equipment. In reality, Hà Nội ended up with little equipment more than other places.

In North Việt Nam, French forces who had fled to China after the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945, returned to the North-west from Yunnan and into the northeast coastal region of Việt Nam from Guangdong. With its remaining 60,000 troops, including many puppet soldiers, the French Military Command occupied South Việt Nam (including Nam Bộ, southernmost central Việt Nam, and the Central Highlands), Laos, and Cambodia in order to fight our guerrilla warfare.

The Vietnamese High Command decided that Hà Nội must not fall to a surprise attack. If the enemy opened fire first, we must strike back immediately. The battle in Việt Nam's capital would symbolize the whole country's spirit of resistance. Hà Nội must keep the enemy in place at least one month in order to give people time to prepare for war.

In places where enemy strength was relatively weak such as in Nam Định, Hải Dương, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, and Vinh, war zones 2, 3, 4, and 12, orders were given to annihilate or cause heavy casualties to the French garrisoned troops.

In war zones 6, 7, 8 and 9 in the southern part of Central Việt Nam and Nam Bộ, our troops were ordered to strengthen their guerrilla warfare capabilities in coordination with the other war zones, thereby making it difficult for the enemy to send reinforcements to the north or central Việt Nam.

In case of a decision by the Central Committee to wage all-out countrywide war, a signal would be sent by the High Command to all war zones. For the first time, we had a national tactical plan.

The Hà Nội front was considered the principal battlefield in the first general confrontation.

When we discussed how to defend Hà Nội, although our objectives and tactical plans had been made clear, there still some

comrades who proposed sending a number of brave soldiers and self-defence guards on a secret incursion mission into the French general headquarters in Hà Nội. This method had been used by the Japanese on the night of 9 March 1945. This was too risky for use to undertake, however, since the French expeditionary corps was completely different from the French colonial troops in early 1945. Moreover, our forces were ill-equipped and far less war experienced than the Japanese troops. A number of former Japanese officers who had sided with the Vietnamese suggested establishing three defence lines with solid fortifications around Hà Nội in order to stop the enemy step by step. This was a classical defensive tactic. But we did not intend to follow this method, partly because of our shortage of material and manpower.

I reminded the Hà Nội Military Command of the national guards and small group of vanguard disseminators who had kept French troops pinned in the Hải Phòng Opera House for a whole day. Buildings with solid structures such as Bắc Bộ Phủ (the former headquarters of the Resident Superior of Tonkin), the City Hall, the Post Office, and the former garrison of security guards might create a connected fighting corridor to resist the enemy for some time. City quarters with small streets and blind alleys like Inter-zone No. 1 were convenient for building barricades to obstruct the advance of French tanks and ground troops, making prolonged resistance possible. The best positions for effective shooting were on top of high buildings. During the battle of Thái Nguyên, I had seen a machine gun of Japanese troops placed on a two-story house control a whole street. We also studied ways of withdrawing our forces safely by examining the city's underground drains. In pressing circumstances, these underground alleys might be useful. Once it was reported that all the drain openings to the river were covered with iron bars, preparations were made to destroy them when necessary.

In six months, Hanoians got used to opposing French encroachments by building barricades from armchairs, tables, beds,

wardrobes, and the like piled up on the street, by felling trees or downing lamp posts and by pushing automobiles, train cars, tramway cars across the roads. However, these obstacles only delayed the enemy's advance for a short time. We needed to build several parallel lines of barricades and ditches and deploy troops to intercept the enemy. By doing so, we could effectively cope with the advance of enemy armored vehicles and infantrymen. Since Hà Nội's streets were obstructed by barricades, we opened communication outlets between the houses, thereby increasing the mobility of our forces.

By building several parallel barricades we could stop the French in the city center from attacking the city suburbs and defend the city for a longer time.

After weighing the pros and cons, the Command of Zone 11 proposed a plan "to attack the enemy inside and to surround them outside" or as it was referred to by comrade Vương Thừa Vũ, "a dual tactical method dangerous for our foes." With ancient streets adjoining the Hà Nội citadel where French troops were concentrated, we decided to defend Inter-zone No. 1 with our utmost efforts. At the outbreak of war, five battalions of national guards and self-defence militia would destroy isolated French posts and important material bases such as the power plant, water plant, petrol depot, Long Biên bridge, and the airfield. They would defend several of our key representative organs such as Bắc Bộ Phủ, the City Hall, and the Post Office. After a few days, a battalion of national guards would withdraw to Inter-zone No. 1 and continue fighting together with the forces from the self-defence militia. Four other battalions and the self-defence militia of Inter-zones 2 and 3 would disperse to suburbs. Relying on the barricades to protect them, they would continue fighting, and attacking the enemy to support Inter-zone No. 1 and prevent a French offensive against Hà Nội's outskirts.

I agreed to this plan for 'attacking the enemy both from inside and outside' which would cause embarrassment to the French and

oblige them to defend themselves from both sides. At the same time, our forces could maintain their mobility and avoid being stuck to solid defensive lines.

The tactical plan for Hà Nội was prepared in detail, with careful calculation of the quantity of ammunition, food, and drinking water needed by the troops defending Inter-zone No. 1. One of the greatest difficulties we continually faced was the marked difference in equipment and technique between our side and the French. For the entire battlefront, we had only 2,250 firearms, mostly obsolete rifles with little ammunition. On average, there was only one hand grenade for every two of our fighters.

We decided to stage a large-scale false maneuver. For a whole week, thousands of self-defence militiamen surrounding the city crept back into the capital to reinforce the garrisoned troops. After midnight, they silently pulled out.

The fighting plan was expeditiously carried out by the city wards. Each day the face of the city changed, with streets rapidly turning into barricades. Once I visited Hoàn Kiếm ward and watched our young men putting up steel poles, digging trenches, and drilling holes in tree trunks to plant mines. I thought then that the anger triggered by Chiang Kai-shek's troops and French forces had effectively prepared us for war.

In mid-December 1946, I reported to Uncle Hồ that Hà Nội could be defended for at least one month, maybe more.

The High Command decided to open fire at 20:00 hours on 19 December 1946, but only Hà Nội implemented the order on time. Other places were late by two to seven hours. There were even places where the French attacked us first.

The French were not caught completely unaware. The author of the *History of Việt Nam* wrote: "On the 19th at 18:00 hours, a French man of mixed blood, who was an agent of the counter intelligence, sneaking in our ranks, reported that three divisions of

Vietnamese troops (!) and self-defence militiamen had received an order to launch the offensive on that night." Molière, commander of French forces in North Việt Nam, immediately placed all the expeditionary corps on full alert.

French troops were ready everywhere. What surprised them was that a young army with poor equipment dared to attack the expeditionary corps. It was the only advantage we had when war broke out throughout the country.

3

The signal for opening fire in Hà Nội was the cutting off of electricity and the artillery guns at Láng military post firing the first rounds. We needed the support of darkness at the beginning of our operation. However, this was not easy. Electricity was generated at the Yên Phụ power plant which was guarded by a mixed contingent of Vietnamese and French troops. A quantity of explosives had to be placed at the right spot at the time fixed for opening fire. If the French discovered it, they would have had an excuse to occupy the plant and attack our forces all over the city.

At Tây Mỗ village, 10 km from Hà Nội, I was waiting for that minute. Hoàng Văn Thái[14] was waiting by the Ministry's telephone switchboard located in Hà Đông town to follow the operation and report to me every two hours.

At 20:03, electricity in Hà Nội was cut off and the guns in Láng military post roared. The workers in the Yên Phụ power plant headed by comrade Giang had marvelously fulfilled their mission. Immediately thereafter, all Hà Nội resounded with the explosions of firearms and artillery shells. The edge of the clouds

14. Later a four-star general of the People's Army of Việt Nam

glowed a brilliant red because of the fires. Those who had been present on the night of the Japanese invasion said that only now was it real war.

The French reacted immediately. Most shots came from their side. Our fighters were ordered to economize on ammunition from the beginning of the offensive.

Hoàng Văn Thái soon reported developments from the front. Our troops had destroyed many isolated pockets of the enemy and many sections of French soldiers in the mixed Franco-Vietnamese guards, and were attacking Deleveau's stores.

I was most interested to learn that only half an hour after the outbreak of the war, the French had divided themselves into groups to attack outside the Citadel. One group left the North Gate and advanced along the Hàng Đậu Street. Another group advanced from the Southern Gate along the Tràng Thi Street. They had seized the Hàng Trống Police Station and headed to the Opera House.

The French would attack the Bắc Bộ Phủ, I thought. The company of national guards defending it had sworn to fight to the end. I reminded the Hà Nội military command to instruct the guards at Bắc Bộ Phủ to prepare for a fight and to use artillery support when the enemy began attacking.

At the T-junction of Hồng Phúc-Hàng Đậu, the national guards and the militia organized an ambush, igniting a bomb that destroyed one tank and killed dozens of French troops. We learned that ambushes could be laid even in city. This was a method of fighting created by the people.

In the course of that night we received news that Nam Định, Hải Dương, Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Vinh, and Huế had begun fighting. The troops in Đà Nẵng were ordered to attack at 21:00 hours; they asked for permission to open fire at 8:30 hours the next morning.

In general, the Việt Minh had the advantage during the first hours of fighting.

4

On the morning of the 20th, Trần Quốc Hoàn, the Party Central Committee's envoy, Hoàng Văn Thái, and I went to Hà Nội's military command. These envoys from various places returned to report on developments that had occurred overnight.

We were listening to their reports when we received word that French troops, with tanks opening their way, were attacking the Opera House, Bắc Bộ Phủ, and the Post Office.

I told Vương Thừa Vũ to order artillery support for our men in Bắc Bộ Phủ. He picked up the phone and, waving his hand, yelled:

"Fire!"

Surprised, I asked why he had not indicated the target. He explained,

"All our objectives had been aimed at in advance. If we now give orders to shoot at new ones, the shells may hit our own soldiers or people!"

Our fighters were engaged in a task far beyond their capabilities.

I requested a visit to the battlefront, and Vương Thừa Vũ took me to Khâm Thiên Street. We did not follow the road but went through the openings that had been made in the walls between the houses. We passed through rooms with all their furniture still intact. Even the blankets were arranged in an orderly fashion at the head of the bed. In courtyard pools, golden fish were swimming leisurely. Poor and rich, the people had left their property behind to evacuate.

At one end of the street, opposite an enemy post at the Shell petrol depot, our barricade stood firm. The acrid smell of gunpowder was like burning charcoal. Among the self-defence

militia were students, poor people, and railway workers with their suntanned complexions and faded blue clothes. Quite a few had only an ink-pot shaped hand grenade, an iron stick, or a knife in their hands.

We were observing from the corner of a wall when a mortar shell from an unknown source exploded a few houses away. French machine guns salvoes followed. Vương Thừa Vũ told me to lie down in a trench.

After this deafening explosion of firearms, suddenly the voice of one of our soldiers singing a song could be feard. Later, a French author wrote that Hà Nội's defenders had fought against the French offensive at Bắc Bộ Phủ until their last bullet and hand grenade, all the while singing songs and playing the mandolin. At the most atrocious moments of battle, songs had a strange effect.

I told Vương Thừa Vũ that we needed to build more barricades and dig more trenches. Our troops should stop the enemy in frontal attacks, but in addition they should have mobile forces ready to surprise our adversary. The experience of the militia on Tràng Thi Street should be widely copied. They had thrown hand grenades and opened fire from house roofs. The lesson of the ambush the previous night at the Hồng Phúc T-junction should also be imitated. Once we knew how to fight, it would not be easy for the enemy to seize our barricades.

By the time the sun had risen high, the gunfire resounded from the center of the city more and more loudly. A French plane flew over Hà Nội and strafed several places. Our anti-aircraft guns shot at it, leaving masses of white smoke in the sky.

On my way back, I felt confident in the fighting spirit of our militia, but I got worried by the small number of our forces. There were only five battalions in all zone 11, and the High Command had no reserve forces. Then an idea flashed across my mind. Zone 11 should merge with Zone 2, then Hà Nội, Sơn Tây, and Hà Đông

would become a front in war zone 2. If this was done, Hà Nội would have a source of additional forces and a fairly large rear area from which to mobilize human and material resources to carry out a long-term war.

That evening, at the central office in Do Lộ, Trường Chinh[15] and I listened to the General Staff's summing up of the first day of fighting, in preparation for its report to Uncle Hồ.

The Việt Minh had fought 30 battles in Hà Nội, either attacking the enemy or stopping their advance, annihilating small positions and isolated pockets of fighting. We could not deal with big concentrations of French troops such as those at Bưởi Secondary School or the French garrison of Đồn Thủy. The fighting at Bắc Bộ Phủ lasted from 5:00 to 18:00 hours. The national guards repulsed many enemy assaults. By the afternoon, the company's political commissar Lê Gia Định concluded that Bắc Bộ Phủ could no longer be defended. He ordered the two platoons under his command to withdraw to the Post Office. He stayed behind with a bomb that he intended to explode, annihilating the first group of French troops to come in. The bomb did not explode, however, and Lê Gia Định heroically sacrificed himself. At the Opera House, two sections under the command of platoon leader Đát, in the course of the night of December 19, had resisted many French assaults. By the morning of December 20, only 12 of our fighters remained. After firing all their ammunition, they had continued close range combat with bayonets and rifle butts. Those captured by the enemy refused to submit, and were killed by firing squad. In Nhà Thờ Street, Trịnh Sĩ Bình, a middle-aged Christian worker, stayed behind to stop the French and give his unit time to withdraw.

On the first day of our national resistance war, there were many examples of heroic fighting in Hà Nội. Hundreds of French

15. The then General Secretary of the CPV

troops were killed, and a number of their tanks and armored vehicles were destroyed. Forty of our soldiers lost their lives. A 250-kg bomb was ignited at the Long Biên bridge but we could not destroy it. Nor could we attack the Gia Lâm airfield as it was heavily guarded.

Messages came in from every province. In Hải Dương, two French platoons were destroyed at the Girl's School and at the Phú Lương Bridge. French troops were also under siege at the bottle factory. In Nam Định, a number of French units were annihilated at the railway station and at the silk thread factory, and part of the weaving mill was seized. The French platoon garrisoned at the Vinh Airfield surrendered. In Huế, we destroyed a number of isolated enemy positions, including those at Ngã Năm, the Thanh Minh Hotel, and the Khải Định School. In Bắc Giang and Bắc Ninh, the enemy was under siege, although only one unit had been destroyed. In Đà Nẵng, the time fixed for opening fire was 8:30 hours on December 20 because of preparation delays. At 5:00 hours the French attacked first, and our forces were at risk of being pushed out of the city.

After listening to those reports, we exchanged views and agreed that after a night and day of fighting, even though we were much weaker than the French, we held the advantage because of our ability to surprise them and we felt we had put them on the defensive. In Hà Nội we could not continue to attack large enemy bases. Small battles and guerilla warfare had to be waged instead. After three days of fighting, the inter-zones might be asked to pull their forces back to better-prepared areas of operation. In Hải Dương, Nam Định, and Huế, we had sufficient forces to attack and even annihilate the enemy.

I decided to send two battalions from Zone 2 to reinforce Hà Nội and to form a main-force regiment under the National Defence Ministry. Each war zone could then effectively control a main-force battalion.

On December 25, the Party Standing Central Committee met to listen to the report on the fighting in Hà Nội. Trường Chinh announced the decision to merge war zones 11 and 2. Hoàng Sâm and Lê Hiến Mai remained commander and political commissar respectively. Vương Thừa Vũ and Trần Độ became their deputies in Zone 2 but also remained commander and political commissar in the Hà Nội battlefront.

5

On 12 January 1947, the first Military Conference was held near Hà Nội.

The war of resistance against the French had already lasted over three weeks. The army and the self-defence militia had surpassed the 15-day target of keeping the enemy in place. Not only Hà Nội, but many other cities also stood firm. A battalion of the 3rd Foreign Legion Infantry regiment had left Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang for Hà Nội.

In response to the appeal for national war, on 20 December 1946 the Nam Bộ's defenders and the death-challenging squads simultaneously opened fire in Saigon, turning the city upside down. In the southern part of central Việt Nam, on the night of 30 December 1946, a military train with 20 cars carrying nearly 200 French officers and servicemen was overturned near the Phan River. In Tây Nguyên (Central Highlands), from 29 to 30 December 1946, French reinforcement convoys were continuously ambushed on the roads from An Khê to Gia Hội, and from An Khê to Thượng An, putting 70 French officers and servicemen out of action.

After 20 days of fighting, the French command was still largely responding defensively and its performance had been embarrassing. General Morlière, commander of French troops in Bắc Bộ, was relieved of his command. Dèbes, who attacked and seized Hải

Phòng in November 1946, replaced him. Valluy, commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary corps, told his troops to "Clench your teeth, and put up with the fierce fighting. You will soon receive reinforcements and supplies."

In certain remote areas, however, the French rapidly enlarged their zone of occupation. In the northwest, they occupied Sơn La, Hát Lót, and Yên Châu. On the Việt Nam-Laos border, they controlled the territory along the Mã River. In the northeast, they could link Tiên Yên, Đình Lập, and Lạng Sơn and were advancing from Đình Lập to Phả Lại with a view to occupying Lạng Sơn, Móng Cái, Hải Phòng, and Phả Lại. Once they received reinforcements, they would develop new goals.

The military conference lasted from 12 to 16 January 1947 in Trúc Sơn[16] where five centuries earlier the historic battle of Trúc Động – Tốt Động had taken place.[17]

Trường Chinh attended the conference as well as the commanders of the zones north of Zone 4.

We concluded that after a period of being relatively passive and defensive, the French were shifting to the offensive and beginning to attack. We guessed that with reinforcements, they would seize and control the area of Hà Nội – Hải Phòng, and Hà Nội – Ninh Bình – Phát Diệm, consolidate Highway No. 1 and the highway along the Red River, develop the battlefront in Sơn La, land troops in Đà Nẵng to relieve Huế and to link Huế and Đà Nẵng, and from a base in Sê Pôn threaten our forces from the back.

We were determined to keep the initiative on all battlefronts and to shift to a new phase of war, avoiding falling into passivity. We would not bring our forces to fight head on the French in big

16. A place in Hà Tây Province, about 20 km from Hà Nội
17. The battle against the Ming aggressors by the Lam Sơn insurrection troops 500 years ago

offensives, instead we would rely on the terrain to continue a guerrilla war and prevent the adversary from quick advances. We would concentrate on attacking and eliminating small groups of the enemy to build our troops' fighting spirit. We would strive to keep the enemy pinned down in the cities for even longer and to foil their efforts to relieve their besieged troops. In an orderly and timely manner, we would withdraw our forces in order to preserve our real strength and prepare for the enemy's enlarged offensives. We decided to organize the western battlefront to lessen the pressure the French were placing on the west and to broaden our base of influence.

Six days earlier, the Party cell in Hà Nội's Inter-zone 1 had proposed merging all national guards, self-defence militia, vanguard police, and city guards in Inter-zone 1 into a single regiment called the Inter-zone 1 Regiment. The High Command agreed. At the Military Conference, I suggested calling Inter-zone 1 Regiment the 'Regiment of the Capital City,' which was warmly welcomed by the conference.

Vương Thừa Vũ reported on the activities of the Hà Nội front, namely its barricade-based fighting, use of mobile forces in the city, and use of reserve forces. Zone 2 recommended fighting against parachutists for reinforcements on the waterways in Nam Định on 6 and 7 January 1947. Trần Đại Nghĩa, Head of the Military Armament Department, reported on the manufacture of bazooka guns and shells to replace three-prong bombs which were difficult to handle and often claimed the life of the user. Hoàng Đạo Thúy, who had just been appointed Head of the Department of Transport and Public Works, reported on the destruction of bridges and roads.

During the morning of the second day of the Conference, we received report that the French had expanded their offensive to Hà Nội's suburbs. Vương Thừa Vũ asked for permission to leave the conference to take command of the fighting.

6

When talking about our early military encounters with the French, we must refer to actions in the capital city of Hà Nội.

Hà Nội was divided into three inter-zones. According to our plans, after three days of fighting and evacuating civilians from the inner city, the forces of Inter-zones 2 and 3 were to gradually spread to the suburbs where barricades had been built to stop the French. The army and militia in Inter-zone 1 were to narrow their fighting area to the quarter adjoining the Hà Nội citadel which they were to defend by every means.

Beginning on 30 December the French launched many offensives in the suburbs, supported by tanks and armoured vehicles and assistance from the air force and artillery.

Our national guards and militia, using rifles, hand grenades, knives, swords, and three-sprong bombs, and relying on barricades, fortifications, trenches, houses and rooftops to slow the French advance, fought the French for each portion of road and each house.

In Khâm Thiên, Hàng Bột, and Đội Cấn streets, the enemy suffered great losses trying to overcome the barricades. Finally, they were forced to give up launching direct attacks. Instead, they sought roundabout ways. Unfortunately, we failed to foresee this development and circumvention.

The battle at Vọng Hospital was most violent. Our armed forces destroyed French tanks with three-prong bombs, then they withdrew upstairs and drove back several enemy assaults. Hundreds of French troops were put out of action and a number of their tanks and vehicles were destroyed. We lost two platoons of national guards and fifty self-defence militiamen.

The French were not able to push the forces of Inter-zones 2 and 3 to the suburbs, which were only 5km away from the centre of the city, until 25 January 1947. The French had covered the

distance in 27 days at an average rate of 200m per day, as noted by one French journalist.

When recalling the fighting in Hà Nội, Inter-zones 2 and 3 are seldom mentioned. However, the fighting there lasted 38 days and nights with 27 days of fighting on the roads leading to the suburbs and many infiltrations into enemy-controlled areas for surprise attacks. If there had not been such coordination in Inter-zones 2 and 3, our forces in Inter-zone 1 could not have engaged the French for so long. Having said this, Inter-zone 1 most symbolized our opposition to the French.

Inter-zone 1 was situated next to the headquarters of the French High Command in the heart of Hà Nội. Its position lay little more than a 'door-bolt' away. This "dangerous access" meant its contingent of fighters had to be ready to sacrifice their lives for the general good.

According to our plans, a battalion of national guards would remain in the inter-zone with the self-defence militia. From the very beginning, however, that battalion was cut into two. One of its companies in Yên Phụ Street could not withdraw to the area we wished to defend at any cost. Consequently, in Inter-zone 1 there were only two companies of national guards and a part of the self-defence militia. These loyal armed forces had been organized by the Hà Nội Party Committee after the General Insurrection of August 19. They formed the core of the thousands of militia troops which included people of all ages and walks of life. Most of them were young, however, and just getting accustomed to military fighting. The nucleus of the inter-zonal leadership was made up of thirty party members, both male and female, who remained within the zone. The inter-zone still contained tens of thousands of Hà Nội residents who had not been able to evacuate in time. Surprisingly, these combatants, from children and young girls to national guards, all bravely fought a foe a thousand times stronger in "face to face" combat.

At first, smaller groups worked to stop the advance of the enemy using simple defences. Then they shifted to a mobile fighting force which relied on trenches and rapid attacks on the enemy from the front, side, and rear. They staged false maneuvers, luring the French into ambushes, thus conserving their forces. They created a new tactic by dividing themselves into small groups and remainly mobile, moving along trenches or from one house to another through openings in the walls. They were invisible and continually created unexpected disasters for the French. An invisible foe is always more frightening than a visible one. Incendiary bottles, hand grenades, rifles, and hunting guns, fired from unknown places inevitably hit their targets. These tenacious fighters refused to limit their fighting to behind the barricades. They frequently went out and attacked isolated groups of French troops. Knowing well the terrain and small lanes of the area, they could appear and disappear without giving the French time to react and still less time to capture their assailants. Thousands of civilians who had not yet evacuated or were determined to stay behind gave whole-hearted support to our troops.

Difficulties arose, however, when our armed forces narrowed their fighting to zones that had to be defended at any cost. As the adjacent population followed them, the number of people in the zone increased by thousands. Food and provisions meant to last 5,000 people three months have quickly been used up. The secret trail along the Red River which led from the inter-zone to the rear also had attracted the attention of the enemy. Through the offices of the Chinese, British and American consuls, we agreed to a 24-hour ceasefire to allow Chinese and Indian nationals as well as Vietnamese civilians to leave the fighting area. The High Command decided to keep only 500 troops from the Capital City Regiment in Inter-zone 1. The greater part of the Regiment was ordered to withdraw with the civilians during the ceasefire. After the ceasefire ended, the Regiment reported that there were still 1,200 civilians

left, including 200 women and 75 children. We did not foresee that so many people would deliberately stay behind to continue fighting the enemy.

French positions around Inter-zone 1 then accelerated their siege. After the departure of foreign residents, the French air force and artillery showed no more restraint. Valluy ordered: "Don't hesitate to strike hard with bombs and guns! You must ensure a quick end! The enemy must be made to understand our overwhelming superiority." On 16 January 1947, in the Đông Thành quarter of Hà Nội, a group of riflemen under the command of Bạch Ngọc Liễn shot down a Spitfire as it flew low to strafe our positions. It was the first time a French plane had been shot down by rifles in Hà Nội. The High Command awarded the Gallant Fighter Medal, third class, for this exploit.

Our supply route from the outside to the inter-zone could have been discovered and cut off by the enemy at any time. The Đông Thành quarter had two light machine guns, but they were in bad condition. A section in Cầu Gỗ street had a magazine rifle, jokingly referred to as a 'cannon'. As the hostilities continued, the paucity of ammunition became serious and our fighters were forced to divide bullets among themselves.

The lunar "year of the pig" (1947) was our first New Year under war conditions. It was followed by many others. Firing at the front replaced the traditional firecrackers that welcomed the arrival of Spring. Fighters living near the front still prepared a meal for their ancestral altars and burned joss sticks on New Year's eve, and they did not forget to send glutinous *chưng* cakes, pork pies, and confectionery boxes to the men at the front. Those in Inter-zone 1 even received a branch of peach blossoms and bundles of fresh flowers from Nhật Tân. On New Year's Eve we launched a wave of attacks in various places and hoisted a yellow-starred red flag on top of the Turtle Tower at Hoàn Kiếm Lake to confirm our presence in the capital city.

The poem composed by Uncle Hồ on New Year's was filled with his optimistic spirit:

"The yellow starred red flag is flying in the wind
The bugle of resistance resounds all over the country
People from all fields have joined the resistance
We have made up our minds and are of one heart
Go forward, fighters! Go forward, compatriots!
Our strength is great; our men are numerous
Lasting resistance will certainly be victorious!
Unification and independence will certainly be achieved!"

Uncle Hồ wrote to Hà Nội's fearless fighters,

"How do you spend the Tết holiday? ... I and the other members of the Government have no heart to enjoy the festivities. With 90 percent of our compatriots in the rear, our pleasure in reveling is reduced 90 percent. Everybody is being thrifty in preparation for a lasting resistance war.

"You are fearless combatants, willing to sacrifice yourselves for the survival of the fatherland. You represent the self-respect and self-reliance that our people have had for thousands of years. This indomitability which has been inherited from the Trưng sisters, Lý Thường Kiệt, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung, Phan Đình Phùng, and Hoàng Hoa Thám[18] is transmitted to you now...

"Little brothers! Go forward with enthusiasm and courage, the heart of Old Hồ, and the heart of all our compatriots is always with you..."

18. Vietnamese national heroes and heroines in various struggles against foreign invaders

After Tết, on 29 January 1947, I went to Hà Nội to meet the Military Command and immediately raised the question of preparing to withdraw the remaining part of the Regiment of the Capital out of Hà Nội.

7

With the arrival of reinforcements, the French launched ferocious offensives against Inter-zone 1 at the beginning of February. Violent battles took place on February 6 at the Sauvagerie Shipping Company (the present-day Nguyễn Huệ School) and on February 7 at the Ke School (the present-day Trần Nhật Duật School) by the Red River. These positions controlled the only way leading from Inter-zone 1 to the outskirts of Hà Nội. Therefore, they had to be defended by every means. In both places, we forced the French to give up their assaults.

For three consecutive days, from February 11 to 13, the Đồng Xuân market area was heavily bombed. At 5:00 a.m. on the 14th, the whole inter-zone was shaken by the pounding of enemy guns, and bombs were dropped along Hàng Mã, Hàng Chiếu, and Ô Quan Chưởng streets. French tanks and armoured vehicles also appeared from several directions. From Hàng Giấy, they advanced as far as the market gate. At Ô Quan Chưởng, they were stopped by a field of iron pikes and sand bags. Behind the Đồng Xuân market, four tanks led the way for the red-beret troops to cross the football field. Our machine guns which were positioned on rooftops fired violently to hinder their advance. As the red-berets approached the market they were hit by sub-machine gun fire, hand grenades, incendiary bottles, and bottles containing gravel and powdered lime. We had halted the offensive.

Around 9:00 a.m., a second assault was staged against the Đồng Xuân market. Spotter planes marked targets for the artillery, and French guns concentrated their firepower on the market. Our

combatants and French troops fought hand to hand in each house and on house roofs. At the end of that battle, the enemy had not yet entered the market. However, they have captured a number of multi-story houses and from there, they used their machine guns to threaten us.

At 12:00 hours, they launched their third offensive. Tanks opened the way for the red berets to get into the market. We had only two sections of Battalion 101. Troops from both sides became intermingled and fought one another with sub-machine guns and hand grenades. We even set bottles filled with oil and rubber stoppers around the butchers' tables. The fierce hand-to-hand battle between unequal forces lasted until 13:00 hours. A number of our fighters were sacrificed, others left the market and seized the tallest houses to open fire at the market.

The fighting finally ended at nightfall. The French lost about 100 men, and three armoured vehicles were destroyed. We lost 15 fighters, including 14-year-old Tuyến, a female liaison, and had 10 wounded.

After the battle, the area of operation of Inter-zone 1 was greatly narrowed. On the evening of February 14, according to the Regiment's report, there were only eight bullets left for each rifle. There was sufficient food for five days if eaten conservatively. The Regiment asked to be allowed to fight until the end.

The Regiment of the Capital City had stayed in Hà Nội for two months, much longer than our set target. The Central Military Committee held an emergency meeting and unanimously decided to order the Regiment to pull out immediately. Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee concurred. On the same night, I sent a message to the Regiment telling it to prepare to withdraw on the evening of February 17.

We had considered withdrawing the Regiment from the very beginning, but this became difficult to do. The route along the dyke

up to Yên Phụ and down to Đồng Nhân had been blocked. We had planned to follow the underground drains, but the drains in Hà Nội were not appropriate for the removal of thousands of people, including wounded soldiers.

On the evening of February 16, the Regiment suggested that boats meet them at Tâm Xá to ferry them across the Red River to the Long Tựu wharf in Đông Anh district.[19]

I told Hoàng Văn Thái to mobilize boats and prepare for the river crossing carefully with the Front Command. Our forces outside the city were ordered to stage a wave of strong attacks on Ô Cầu Dền, Ô Cầu Giấy, and Ô Chợ Dừa,[20] and to dispatch many groups of fighters into the city to attack and divert the enemy's attention on the nights of February 16 and 17.

At mid-night on February 17, the sounds of firing guns resounded all over the capital. The flames of burning houses rose up in many places in Inter-zone 1. The French thought that a major assaults by our troops was taking place. At the same time, 1,200 combatants, including women, children, and wounded soldiers were divided into many small groups and hidden under the Long Biên bridge while French guards were standing overhead with their weapons ready to fire. Then they crossed the Red River by boats.

At noon of February 18, Hoàng Văn Thái happily reported on the successful withdrawal of the Regiment of the Capital. Not a single person or a single rifle was left behind. Exceedingly glad, I at once wrote a short letter to the Regiment which read in part:

"... Combatants, you have fought for two continuous months to keep the flag of Việt Nam flying in its capital Hà Nội. You have

19. A district on the outskirts of Hà Nội
20. Gateways to Hà Nội

enhanced the heroism of the Vietnamese and the honour of the National Army of Việt Nam.

"You have helped break the enemy siege in order to preserve our main forces. You will continue to struggle for the fatherland. We will struggle ten years or longer if necessary.

"Until our nation regains its independence and unification,"

"until Hà Nội becomes the capital of an independent and unified nation,"

"we swear that Hà Nội will overcome the enemy!"

On February 22, together with Trần Quốc Hoàn, Hoàng Văn Thái, and Vương Thừa Vũ, I visited the Regiment at Thượng Hội village, in Đan Phượng district, Hà Đông province.

All the Regiment's officers and fighters gathered in the village communal house.

I had never seen a military contingent with so many rich colours. The combatants included all ages, from children to grey haired people. There were quite a few women dressed in all types of clothes. The troops of honour looked proud and fearless in their khaki uniforms, their caps with the yellow-starred red insignia, their red scarves, and their submachine guns. Most people wore casual clothes: the blue costumes of workers, simple men's jackets, helmets, felt hats, and black or brown civilian shoes. Here and there the green colour of the national guards appeared. The common thread was that everybody held some kind of arms with a bullet bag or a hand grenade at their belt. Their features had been steeled by the smoke and fire of the battlefield but they had not lost the elegance of the youths and students of the capital.

Here I learned that during the withdrawal of the Regiment from Hà Nội, the Hồng Hà guerrilla group had had a successful exploit. Group leader Nguyễn Ngọc Nại had maintained liaison between the Regiment and the Front Command for the last two months. His

groups had guided the Regiment out of Hà Nội during the siege. They did not have many boats, and until 8:30 in the morning of February 18, they were still ferrying troops across the river thanks to the morning mist.

At noon, the Regiment had left the Long Tựu wharf once the French realized that our forces had withdrawn from Inter-zone 1. The French mustered troops to run after the Việt Minh. Nguyễn Ngọc Nại ordered his men to open fire as soon as the enemy arrived at the Tầm Xá river plain in order to attract their attention and ensure the safety of the withdrawing regiment. The entire section spread out to oppose the French. Eight of its ten members were killed including section leader Nguyễn Ngọc Nại, an 18-year-old communist.

Some 150 years before, the Red River, which was then called Nhị Hà, witnessed the flight of Tôn Sĩ Nghị troops, of which thousands drowned. Their bodies filled the river current. The Red River witnessed a similar exploit with the final withdrawal of the Regiment of the Capital in the midst of a thick siege. It exemplified their extreme bravery, organizational skill, and discipline to be able to coordinate and assist the population of the Red River's riparian communes to withdraw under such conditions.

I conveyed Uncle Hồ's commendation to the Regiment and talked to them. On behalf of the Defense Ministry and the High Command, I awarded them a flag embroidered with the golden characters 'Regiment of the Capital' to mark this happy day.

With one voice, all the Regiment's officers and servicemen shouted: 'We swear that the Capital will win victory over the enemy!'

8

In Đà Nẵng, under the 6 March 1946 Preliminary Accord, the French were allowed to station one battalion. On 9 December 1946,

they illegally landed a second battalion of the 13th Foreign Legion Brigade, which increased the French force in Đà Nẵng to 1,800 men. They also took advantage of the strong firepower of the war ships moored in the port. We had only two regiments of Zone 5. We received the open-fire order late and not having had enough time to prepare, and being attacked first, our troops fought weakly. They had to withdraw from the city after three days of hostilities. The population of Hòa Vang, Điện Bàn, Duy Xuyên, and Đại Lộc districts,[21] together with the armed forces, built a defensive line tightly surrounding the city, cutting off the liaison between Đà Nẵng and Huế. Soldiers and militiamen continually intruded into the city to harass and sabotage the French, creating waves of 'general disturbance' for the enemy. It took the French one month to stabilize the inner city and to launch sweeps on the Sơn Trà peninsula. The armed forces of Đà Nẵng were awarded the flag 'Staunch Defence' by Zone 5.

In Huế, there were 750 French troops from the 21st Colonial Infantry Regiment and the 6th Armored Vehicles Regiment. On our side, Zone 4 had mustered more than two regiments and 1,000 self-defence militiamen. They were sufficient in number but very poorly equipped. The French gathered in the city and relied on a number of solidly-built houses for defense. Our troops surrounded the garrison area of the French, launching many offensives without success. The French assaults with tanks and armored vehicle support sought to break our siege but were repulsed by our troops. Tightly besieged, the French had to parachute in food, ammunition, and medicinal supplies.

At the first military conference on 12 January 1947, the High Command had instructed War Zone 4 to decimate, and annihilate the French step by step. They were told not to deploy our forces

21. Places in Quảng Nam province

in decisive battles, but to pull out of the city in time to preserve our forces. The High Command did not accept a proposal to call in reinforcements and death-challenging fighters from other districts to wipe out the French before their reinforcements arrived. To implement the Ministry's instructions, the Thừa Thiên Regiment readjusted the disposition of its forces. Only two battalions continued to surround Huế, the remaining units were pulled out. From mid-January 1947, the French mobilized a large number of troops to break the siege on Huế. We stopped the adversary on Highways 1 and 9. The battle of Đầu Mầu proved especially effective.

On 4 February 1947, to liberate Huế, the French brought in troops from several directions, parachuting them in or landing them on seacoast with air and artillery. On the afternoon of February 8, we received Zone 4's report: "The Huế war front has been broken. Soldiers could not keep their ranks. Officers could not control their men. Communications between offices were cut off... the population lost confidence."

Only after some time were we able to stabilize the situation of Bình-Trị-Thiên. Nguyễn Chí Thanh[22] and many communist party members played an important role in retrieving the situation after the breakdown of the Huế front.

The army and the people of Huế had kept the French at bay in the ancient capital city for nearly 50 days and nights of heroic fighting. If we had been able to carry out our troop withdrawal in time, Huế would have been considered a successful operation for this initial period of the war. Historians writing about the Indochinese war have described the battle in Huế as important. A French historian, for example, has written: "Huế had been encircled for 46 days and nights. French infantrymen,

22. A general of the People's Army of Việt Nam

parachutists, and marines had fought strenuously for 18 days and nights to liberate it."

In Nam Định, Regiment 34 of Zone 2 and 1,000 self-defence militia encircled Battalion 2 of the French 6th Colonial Regiment.

Three waves of attacks by our troops during the first ten days caused the enemy great casualties. The French firmly defended the thread factory and the Carreau camp but their morale was low.

Early in January, it was reported that the French were preparing to send forces from Hải Phòng by sea to reinforce Nam Định. Our High Command ordered Zone 2 to deploy troops to fight them at the Ba Lạt estuary. At the same time Zone 3 was ordered to coordinate fighting on the left bank of the river.

On the evening of January 7, we received a report that two days earlier, Nam Định forces had killed 50 French parachutists, and that the previous day they had caused great losses to the French landing along the Đào River. The remaining French troops had had to flee to the thread factory. It was the first time that our troops had won a victory over enemy parachutists, marines, and infantrymen at the same time. I immediately asked Zone 2 to send a man to report on the operation.

On January 9, Lâm Kính, chief of staff of Zone 2 and an envoy of the Ministry came to the General Staff's office in Trúc Sơn. Trường Chinh, Hoàng Hữu Nam, and I listened to their reports. We drew a number of conclusions. Armed with rifles our troops could not prevent the enemy from moving on such a large river as the Red River. We were able to fight them when they landed. Therefore, we knew we must find ways to stop the French boats on the river. Could we use the experience of our forefathers and plant pikes or build dykes on the river?

In Nam Định, our army and people had to confront parachutists for the first time. Parachutists were not strong when they touched the ground. Our soldiers, even an old man with a cutlass, could also kill

the enemy at this time. Some parachutists hit tree branches and their bellies were torn opened. If we planted many pikes in places where they might parachute, we would create great difficulty for them.

Only a short time later, a movement to build dykes on the rivers and to plant anti-parachutist pikes was launched.

Foreseeing eventually that French would have to recapture Nam Định and seize the northeast quadrilateral, we took the initiative of mapping out a plan to deal with this.

The High Command entrusted Zone 2 with deploying forces along Highway 1 and the Red River dyke. Regiment 34, which was encircling Nam Định, would leave only part of its forces in the city when the time came. The greater part would withdraw without delay and be deployed along the Red River dyke, and in the areas of Hà Nam and Nam Định provinces. Zone 3 was told to use one regiment to attack and threaten the south-west of Hải Phòng, thereby pushing back the French contingent that was assaulting Phả Lại. At the same time, guerrilla warfare on Highway 5 would be increased.

On March 6, French forces with 200 armored vehicles advanced to Nam Định along the Red River. They did not take Highway 1 since it was heavily damaged. Regiment 34 continued to lay ambushes and to attack the enemy, claiming many French lives and destroying four vehicles.

On the evening of March 11, we learned that the last battalion of Regiment 34 had been able to withdraw from Nam Định.

In Nam Định, our army and people had encircled the French for 83 days and nights, the longest period of any city. The armed forces had applied successfully the tactic "besiege the citadel and destroy the reinforcements," killing hundreds of French troops while preserving their own forces. At the suggestion of the High Command, Uncle Hồ conferred on Regiment 34 of Zone 2 the title "Regiment of Inevitable Victory."

Around that time, we also opened the Tây Tiến (or westwards) battlefront. Laos had declared its independence in August 1945. Ever since, a Việt Nam-Laos joint army had been fighting shoulder to shoulder against the French colonialists who wanted to restore their rule in Indochina. The French had occupied half of Laos, and the Lao independent government headed by Fedsarat was living in exile in Thai territory. The Tây Tiến front was designed to eliminate the French threat from the western part of Việt Nam and fulfill our international duty to help liberate the Lao people. Hoàng Sâm and Lê Hiến Mai were appointed chief commander and political commissar of the front.

The High Command merged three battalions from Hà Nội, Zone 2, and Zone 3 to form the armed forces of the front, with Sầm Nưa as our area of operation. Zone 4 also dispatched a battalion from Thanh Hóa to Sameua and a battalion from Nghệ An to Xieng Khouang. In my letter to the troops before their departure, I advised the officers and men: "To stand on a position of equality and mutual assistance when working with the Lao people and to solve any problems for the sake of their liberation movement." The alliance and solidarity between Việt Nam and Laos had ever since remained strong.

The appearance of our forces in the western battlefield surprised the French. We quickly liberated the Mã River, Sầm Tớ, and thrust deep into Sameua. Our troops observed our policies to the letter and were, therefore, welcomed and wholeheartedly supported by the Lao people. In battle, the Lao people informed our troops about the French garrison, supplied them with food, and took care of our wounded soldiers. To rescue Sầm Nưa and to replace their troops in the northwest, the French Command of North Indochina had to send troops from Hà Nội to Hòa Bình, Mộc Châu, and Sơn La via Highway 6.

In response to President Hồ Chí Minh's appeal to the entire nation to join the resistance and to implement instructions from the

High Command, all battlefields in South Việt Nam sped up their activities in coordination with those of the north.

During January 1947, in Zone 6, after the Phan River battle during which we derailed a train on the night of December 31, we launched ambushes at Bản Nham, Phương Cần, and Bầu Đá, and intercepted the enemy in Cả Pass. We also attacked a French battalion in Phú Lâm. Hundreds of French troops were put out of action.

In the Central Highlands, popular bases were set up in many places. The army and people of An Khê destroyed roads and communication lines, planted pikes, arranged booby traps, and organized fighting villages.

In Nam Bộ, many ambushes and offensives yielded good results such as the battles of Cổ Cò (Sa Đéc) and Long Mỹ (Rạch Giá) in January. In early February, the provisional Party Committee of Nam Bộ issued instructions to expedite guerrilla warfare and "fight the enemy in all fronts." Political struggles developed in the cities and towns. The armed forces continued to consolidate and develop. By mid-February, the Party Committee of Zone 1 launched a "general offensive, harassment, and sabotage" campaign. Everywhere battles were planned to secure communication lines and economic advantages. Many roads were heavily damaged, bridges were broken, and logistic bases were burned down. Dykes were built across rivers. In eastern Nam Bộ, rubber plantations were burned. In Sài Gòn (Saigon), workers set fire to the rice-husking mill and the rubber factory, preventing the French from plundering rice and raw materials for export. The French faced many difficulties in transporting their troops and ensuring their mobility.

In South Việt Nam various battlefields were coordinated in a timely and effectively manner. Except for two battalions of the 13th Foreign Legion Brigade, which were sent from the Central Highlands to Đà Nẵng to participate in the Huế battlefield, the French were not able to send any military units from Nam Bộ or

from the extreme south central Việt Nam to the North. General Salan, deputy commander of the French expeditionary corps, remarked, "In Nam Bộ, General Nyo had under his control 21 infantry battalions, nine armored vehicle battalions with 25,000 European troops, 3,000 African soldiers, and 10,000 local partisans. However, these forces were far from sufficient, the troops were exhausted."

9

A Western historian has written that in the Việt Nam war, the French expeditionary corps were always seeking pitched battles, and finally they had them at Điện Biên Phủ. Actually the French had to fight pitched battles from the very beginning of the war, in the cities and on the plains.

In the ancient capital of Thăng Long, it was the third time that we fought the French.

In contrast to 60 years before, the war this time started in Sài Gòn and Hà Nội, although our equipment showed no great difference. On the contrary, this time the enemy was several times stronger than before. The French forces in Hà Nội were not led by a few subordinate officers but by a major general who had much experience in the Second World War. On our side, the chief commander of Hà Nội Front was Vương Thừa Vũ, a railway worker. Before the August Revolution, he had been trained in a non-commissioned officers' school.

Except for Hải Dương, in most cities where fighting took place, our army and people succeeded in keeping the French pinned down for about two months. Only in Huế did we suffer significant losses in the last days of the battle, after the French received reinforcements and we did not withdraw in time. In other places, French forces were reduced because of battle casualties, while our

troops became accustomed to war and increased in numbers. At the beginning of the battle in Hà Nội, we had only five battalions of national guards. After 60 days of fighting, we had two regiments: the Capital and the Thăng Long regiments, (minus one battalion which had been moved to the western front).

The battle in Hà Nội symbolized that period of the war.

In preparing for battle, we were aware of our disadvantages. Our forces were similar to an insurrection army. If we had spread out in a face-to-face confrontation with the French expeditionary corps, we would have been broken after a few hours of fighting.

So we devised a new tactical method: a combination of pitched battle and guerrilla warfare. This was not a repetition of existing barricade tactics used in street fighting. We built solid barricades and dug trenches to obstruct the mobility of the enemy's tanks and armored vehicles and to limit the destruction caused by their bombs, artillery guns and other kinds of weapons. Unlike ordinary pitched battles or barricade-based ones, our troops did not try to stop the enemy in fixed places. We used small groups of combatants. Great importance was attached to their mobility, secrecy, and activeness. We avoided large-scale battles; instead, we waged a series of small carefully prepared battles. The Front Command instructed the troops "not to wage large-scale battles without clear and well-thought out plans and not to initiate battles." During the 60 days of fighting, the French launched 30 battles and our troops launched over 100 attacks designed to intercept the enemy. At the same time, we capitalized on the initiative of each person, using their strong pointing, with the single goal of destroying the enemy and preserving our forces.

The self-defence militiamen and the Việt Minh fighters became the core of a "all-people's war." The people turned the streets into a maze and discovered their own way of fighting. A girl or a boy could kill a French legionnaire. After only a short time, the people sided with our soldiers and became combatants themselves.

Despite its overwhelming superiority in armaments, the French Command was embarrassed for quite a long time, not knowing where to use its strength. The difficulty for the French was not the barricades we had erected in Inter-zone 1 or in the suburbs. Their main foe was the multitude of small groups of fighters who appeared and disappeared all over the city, firing rifles from their side, or throwing hand grenades which exploded separately here and there but hit very accurately. The activities of these groups also made the enemy believe that we had kept our main forces in the city and they waited for a large-scale battle.

A correspondent from the French news agency AFP was present in Hà Nội at that time and described the fighting there as follows: "I have seen how the French died under the fire of Vietnamese soldiers on the front line of Hà Nội or in strange battles in the very heart of the city, at a corner or a street, or killed by a volley of submachine gun bullets firing along an avenue. In this *strange war,* [23] one might die easily anywhere, at any time. One could never know.... In a unit posted at the Notre Dame Cathedral, to prevent attacks from Hàng Bông Street, the commanding Lieutenant told me that 35 of his men had been killed. Wherever they garrisoned, the French always occupied the second floor and left the floors below uninhabited. They even burned the adjoining house for fear of the Việt Minh surprise attacks... At night, Việt Minh soldiers sneaked into the streets, nimbly, making no noise, and invisibly. From upstairs, the French threw down hand grenades, but they continued attacking tenaciously and bravely, uttering terrible war cries. At dawn, they disappeared like smoke. In daytime, they looked for a safe hiding place and aimed their guns at enemy positions. There was firing even in daytime, not only at places with a clear front line but also in places where the French thought they had already swept out all the Việt

23. Author's emphasis

Minh. I had just passed by a place and one hour later, French soldiers were seen being shot dead there..."

We called our fighting tactic in Hà Nội "guerrilla in-front warfare." *(du kích trận địa chiến)*. The term seemed inappropriate since it combined two quite different tactics. Generally, guerrilla means "to move and attack." Its characteristic is to move. Front warfare relies on trenches and fortifications. Its characteristic is the use of a fixed battlefield. In fact, the Việt Minh combined the two tactics thereby creating a new form in our people's war. It stemmed from the idea of a people's war, from the guerrilla fighting method of President Hồ Chí Minh, from the battles in Sài Gòn and Hải Phòng, and from the ideas of our forefathers to use "weaker forces to overcome stronger ones," and "smaller numbers to oppose larger forces."

Our strategic initiative can be attributed to our Party's early realization that the French would certainly attack us and that we would certainly have to fight them. Therefore we had a certain amount of time to prepare. The open-fire order on the afternoon of 19 December 1946 was a clear-sighted, audacious, and responsible decision by Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee. This decision misled the French, causing them to change their original plan to attack and rapidly smash our forces and take control the capital to a more protracted defence plan that depended on the arrival of reinforcements and a later, large-scale counter-offensive. Some people considered the December 19 battles to be strategic offensives or strategic surprise attacks. In my view, this is not appropriate. The battles at the start of the war, however fierce or large in scale, were still aimed at concealing our real forces and our real strategic intention of keeping the French in place for some time and causing them losses in order to give our people time to prepare for war. By the time the enemy discovered our objective, we had already fulfilled our goals and were ready to enter a lasting war. The art, and our achievements, was in starting an all-people's war

against an enemy several times stronger who was already present in the capital and all other large cities.

The decisive factor in our general confrontation with the French was our people's spiritual strength and patriotism.

They were the same people but their lives had been changed dramatically since the August Revolution. The citizens of the DRVN were far different from the humble people of Annam under the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945), and who still lingered with the Lê Dynasty (1428-1789) and were angry at the repression of the peasantry and the cruel reprisals against the Tây Sơn generals, in spite of their exploits of driving away the foreign aggressors.

The martial spirit of our people had revived.

Our young men who had sworn their readiness to die. Instead of tattooing the words "Sát Thát" (Kill the Mongolians) on their arms, they were willing to hit enemy tanks with a bomb in their hands.

Some children, following the example of Trần Quốc Toản, remained in Hà Nội without their parents' permission and fought against the cruel and impetuous French legionnaires.

Young girls followed the steps of Trưng sisters and Dame Triệu "to fight the invaders when they came to our land." Among the women who stayed behind in Hà Nội, some were sisters. There were also cases of women remaining behind to fight beside their lovers.

Guerrilla in-front warfare was our first creation in the art of waging an all-people's war in the cities. However, like other tactics, this tactic had its own limitations. Given the disparities between our troops and the French, we could not prolong the fighting in the cities. It was time we shifted to new tactics and began a long-term resistance war.

CHAPTER II

RETURNING TO TÂN TRÀO

1

In the early months of 1947, the organs of the central government were still moving within 20 km from Hà Nội in order to direct the main battlefront conveniently. Before the outbreak of national war, Uncle Hồ gave Trần Đăng Ninh the responsibility of preparing bases in places where the government could be located in the southwest of Hà Nội.

Uncle Hồ had left Vạn Phúc for Thanh Hồi,[24] a village by the Đáy river [25] near Ngã Ba Thá, [26] west of the Ba La Bông Đỏ [27]-Vân Đình [28] road. He lived in a small granary. During the day, he worked by the light which came through a small window. He seldom went out. At dusk, he silently went beyond the village's bamboo hedge and visited a number of the Central Committee organs. His precautions were not unnecessary. Later, we learned that the French were planning to parachute troops into his residence, which they thought was at the Trầm Pagoda.

What happened on the night of December 19 rocked France. D'Argenlieu was then in Paris. Hawkish circles in France raised a hue and cry: "The Việt Minh have betrayed us" and "the French

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24, 25, 26, 27, 28. Places in Hà Tây province

expeditionary corps have become victims of a long-planned Việt Minh scheme!" The new French Prime Minister, Leon Blum, had just formed his government three days earlier, on December 16. He had dispatched Marius Moutet, the minister of French Overseas Territories, to Indochina with the special task of seeking an agreement with president Hồ Chí Minh at any cost, when the situation had become tense. When Moutet left France, the war had already broken out. Leon Blum was a veteran member of the Socialist Party who did not approve of colonialism and loved peace. He was embarrassed by developments in Indochina. On December 23 he told the National Assembly: "The old colonial regime which is aimed at exploiting the land and the labor of the people of the colonies has become obsolete... It is necessary to act with good faith to continue our uncompleted work, that is, to organize a free Việt Nam in the free Indochinese Union which associates with the French Union. But first of all we must restore order to create the necessary basis to implement the agreements." The day before, Blum had entrusted Leclerc with the task of making an inspection tour of Indochina as a special envoy of the French prime minister. On December 25, Leclerc left France for Việt Nam.

On December 29, the *Voice of Việt Nam* broadcast president Hồ Chí Minh's letter to Prime Minister Blum, requesting that French troops return to the positions they held before 19 December 1946 and observe a cease fire. He also expressed his pleasure at Moutet's visit to Indochina. A few days later, Uncle Hồ expressed his readiness to meet Moutet in Hà Nội and his desire to meet Leclerc, Prime Minister Blum's special envoy. His letter to Moutet read in part, "I am glad to know that you have come to Hà Nội. My congratulations, as you are at the same time an old friend of mine, the representative of new France, and a peace messenger. I earnestly wish and will be very happy to meet you to express our sincere desire for peace and cooperation and to present our proposals for restoring good relations between our two nations." He handed this letter to the US and Chinese consuls in Hà Nội. Yet

it was forwarded to Washington, and only then to Paris, after Moutet had returned to France. Prime Minister Blum only received Uncle Hồ's 17 December 1946 message after hostilities had broken out all over Việt Nam. Valluy and Pignon had delayed forwarding our diplomatic correspondence to the French authorities in order to invalidate them.

Leclerc could not meet Uncle Hồ because the task of contacting our government had been entrusted to Moutet. As soon as Moutet arrived in Sài Gòn, he was dissuaded by D'Argenlieu, Valluy, and Pignon, and he returned to France with the message: "Only after the restoration of order by force can the political issues be reexamined." Leclerc believed in his previous assessment that to reconquer Indochina by force would require 350,000 troops, but that a lasting political solution eventually must be reached with 24 million Vietnamese people. In the meantime, to launch a strong military operation in the winter of 1947-1948 would require increasing the expeditionary corps to 115,000 men. This he believed would create a strong posture for negotiations. It seemed that Leclerc and Moutet shared the same views on this. Leclerc also had realized that a solution in Indochina was extremely difficult given existing conditions. He had twice refused the French government's request that he return to Indochina to continue his work.

The Blum government remained in power for only one month. Hawkish circles in France wanted war in Indochina so that France could carry out their intentions without obstacles.

Uncle Hồ had to frequently change his residence. From Vạn Phúc, he moved to Xuyên Dương (Thanh Oai), then Cần Kiệm (Thạch Thất, Sơn Tây), and then to Một Mái Pagoda, Sài Sơn (Quốc Oai, Hà Đông). On February 16, in Chương Mỹ, he presided a regular meeting of the Government Council, listened to reports from the Ministries of Economy and Foreign Affairs, and discussed the problems of the resistance war. The meeting lasted until 4:30 the next morning.

During this period, Uncle Hồ, the Standing Central Committee and the government closely directed the fighting in Hà Nội as well as the mobilization of the whole country to wartime conditions. The initial phase of the war was a great success. Leading organs and material bases were moved to safe areas in secrecy. Uncle Hồ gave particular attention to the storing of rice and salt, the indispensable necessities of the people. He entrusted Nguyễn Lương Bằng[29] with the task of transporting 20,000 tons of salt from Văn Lý (Nam Định) to Việt Bắc. Despite a tight blockade in the coastal area since the Frontier campaign had begun in 1950, we still had 40 tons of salt to send to Cao Bằng.

Uncle Hồ also gave special attention to the evacuation of the population. On 31 December 1946 he established a central evacuation committee. He decided that each province, district, and village must set up an evacuation committee and a station to receive the evacuees, arrange their living quarters, help with the transport of their luggage, and assist them to make their living in agricultural production. In his letter to the evacuees dated 17 February 1947, he wrote, "To evacuate is also to participate in the resistance... Evacuees must also do production work." He called on the population in the rear region to "help each other. People of the same country must take pity on one another."

Though very busy, Uncle Hồ still spared time to visit many places. Early in February, he attended the conference on organizing assistance for the evacuees in Ninh Bình. From February 18 to 20, he went to Thanh Hóa. Like our forefathers, he attached great attention to this region in the struggle against foreign invasion. He considered Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An the second base of the resistance in the North. In a message to the province before his departure, he requested that a conference of

29. Later President of the SRVN

officials, district representatives, representatives of all ethnic minorities and religions, landowners and tradesmen be convened. In a talk on the afternoon of February 20 in Rừng Thông (Đông Sơn district) he expressed the hope that Thanh Hóa would become "a exemplary province in national resistance and construction." In the economic field, he said: "In order to increase production... we must use the people's efforts, capabilities, and resources to work for the people's interest," we must "ensure that the poor have enough to eat, those who have had enough food become well-off and rich, those who have been well-off and rich become richer, that everybody can read and write, that everybody promotes solidarity and patriotism."

The other day, Vũ Kỳ, Uncle Hồ's secretary, wrote me to say that Uncle Hồ needed a history of Việt Nam. It was difficult to find such a book when people had left Hà Nội with only a rucksack on their shoulders. Later, I learned that Vũ Kỳ had found a *Brief History of Việt Nam* by Trần Trọng Kim. Uncle Hồ highlighted the paragraphs about uprisings and struggles against foreign aggression, especially the war against the Yuan-Mongolians[30] and the Lam Sơn insurrection[31] and told Vũ Kỳ to remind Trường Chinh and me to read these passages.

2

In January 1947, the French stepped up their military activities in many battlefields, attempting to recapture besieged cities and expand the areas they occupied. By mid-February, a new phenomenon had occured: the breakup of war fronts.

Once the Huế front was broken up, the Sơn La front followed. The Sơn La regiment, after fighting the French for many months, was

30. The struggle against northern invaders by Trần Hưng Đạo in the 13th centry
31. The Lam Sơn insurrection against Ming invaders by Lê Lợi in Thanh Hóa Province

finally forced out of the north-west region and had to withdraw to Lai Đông, Thu Cúc in the province of Phú Thọ. On the northeastern front, the Tiên Yên regiment had to leave the frontier land of Hải Ninh province and withdraw as far as Bắc Giang.

Large regions with strategically important positions and dense populations temporarily became enemy-occupied areas!

The breakup of battlefronts was a quite different situation from that of a revolutionary troop's withdrawal. It had many negative consequences. Contact between many units was cut off. Morale wavered among both officers and men. Some officers ran away, some soldiers left their units. The population was bewildered and began to think that the enemy was too strong. This phenomenon would not stop unless quick measures were taken.

The major ideas guiding the resistance had been expressed by President Hồ Chí Minh in the article entitled "The Pressing Actions to be Taken Now," published in 5 November 1946.

He realized that the French would fight us till the end "because their failure in Việt Nam would break all their imperialist possessions into pieces." He predicted that they would send large reinforcements, planes, and tanks to sow the seeds of destruction in Việt Nam, and to cruelly terrorize the Vietnamese people. But he knew that their forces were limited. He said that if we resolutely oppose them through the phase of lightning war and "endeavor to put up with the cold winter, we shall meet spring." Our resistance war was associated with national construction. To create a lasting resistance by all the people, it was important to instill confidence and determination. We may have to withdraw from the cities but we will keep all the rural areas.

The one-year resistance in Nam Bộ proved that the French, in spite of their tremendous strength, could never destroy our armed forces if we strictly observed guerrilla tactics. The army and people of Nam Bộ also testified that guerrilla warfare could be waged in rural areas, on

the plains, even in the cities, if we relied on the people. "Mountains of people" and "seas of people" replaced real mountains and forests in effectively concealing our guerrilla fighters. That is why the 22 December 1946 instructions of the Standing Central Committee regarding the resistance by all the people, suggested the motto "Strict application of guerrilla warfare tactics."

As for our main forces, they had been organized up to the regiment or battalion level. However, given our level of equipment and tactics, they were not able to spread out into front lines which could check the enemy's advance. Therefore, the instructions to our troops ordered them "to strictly follow mobile guerrilla warfare."

The first military conference held in mid-January 1947 in Chương Mỹ district, Hà Đông province concluded that the French were considering counter-offensive measures designed "to swallow our country." To recover the initiative in various fronts, our troops had to change their tactics, adopting mobile guerrilla warfare as their core strategy.

Mobile guerrilla warfare is not really guerrilla warfare because the forces involved are relatively large. But it is not conventional mobile warfare either because it does not involve the fighting of large military units, the operational area is not very big, and the style of fighting is different, involving laying siege, attacking from the back, launching surprise attacks, laying ambushes, and combining all these forms. In the course of war, guerrilla warfare must develop into mobile warfare. The two tactics differ in level and scale. The mobile guerrilla warfare of the Việt Minh lay midway in this development process.

After the conference, I exchanged views with the General Staff and ordered our troops to start applying "mobile guerrilla warfare tactics." On 1 February 1947, a General Staff order was sent to all the military units. Its assessment was that the enemy was always moving and capable of concentrating its forces to attack us from

many sides. Our forces, in contrast, were often spread into a battlefront and lacked mobility. Therefore, they were forced into a passive position and missed many chances to defeat the French. The order described the causes of this situation as follows: liaison among the troops was not good, reconnaissance and intelligence work was not effective, information was not accurate or clear, the terrain and the communication routes within each units' zone of action were not well known, our fighters were not accustomed to mobility, and their tactical method was not flexible. Concrete measures were proposed to overcome each of these shortcomings. The troops at front lines were told to change their positions frequently, to refrain from staging pitched battles, to apply flexible tactics, and to be ready to cope with any development on the front. The troops in the rear were told to change the places of their garrison often and to remain mobile.

From February 14 to 16, a conference of zonal and regimental political commissars was held. As Secretary of the Party Military Committee, I co-chaired the conference with Văn Tiến Dũng.

This was the first national conference on the political work of the army. At the conference, I presented a report on "The Military Situation, Strategies and Tactics, and the Task of Political Work in the Army." The conference concluded that "the resistance war has entered an important period, a period of difficult trials." Political work was considered important for "bringing the national army to victory and contributing to the success of the national liberation war."

The conference outlined ten tasks of political work, the main goal of which was to enhance the troops' fighting spirit and confidence in the victory of the resistance war. Other tasks were to strengthen individual's will to fight during dangerous moments, to increase technical and tactical study and training, to correctly implement the guiding principle of our military strategy, to enhance the sense of discipline, to preserve the army's internal cohesion and

solidarity with the people, to effectively mobilize the people, and to carry out agitation work aimed at the enemy.

The conference discussed the important questions of political work, especially those involving personnel, consolidating and perfecting the political organs within the army, and determining the tasks and authority of the political commissars of the zone, the regiment, and down to the platoon level. The company level was considered the fundamental unit for political work.

The conference also devised "twelve disciplines" and "ten oaths of honour" that officers and men were to learn by heart and read aloud under the national banner whenever the troops gathered for roll call. These measures proved very effective in educating the army and strengthening the relationship between the army and the people during the course of war. The criteria used to evaluate the success of political work were "the victories won by the soldiers and their welcome by the people wherever they went."

On March 2, I personally witnessed the first large-scale operation carried out by French troops starting from Hà Nội. Their tanks and armored vehicles opened the way for their infantry troops to advance in two prongs: from southwest Hà Nội to Hà Đông, Mai Lĩnh, Trúc Sơn, Trầm Pagoda, Sơn Lộ, Quốc Oai, and Thầy Pagoda; and from Chèm along the Red and Đáy river dykes down to Phùng bridge to attack Đan Phượng region. Their broadcasts publicly said that the operation was aimed at capturing the leading organs of Việt Minh which they had spotted in the area.

Many central organs in the southwestern districts of Hà Nội were in the way of the French advance. Some battalions just established to defend these organs of government and the Regiment of the Capital which had just been pulled out from Hà Nội's Inter-zone 1 took positions along the dykes or behind village bamboo hedges, ready to fight the enemy should they come.

I was worried by the fact that the barricades that had been built laboriously by the people on the dyke could not hold back an advance of French tanks and armored vehicles. The rumbling of the tanks resounded all over the region. From the top of the dykes, the long barrels of their guns could easily rain shells down on the villages.

From the beginning of the war, the destruction of enemy tanks and armored vehicles had posed a thorny question. We could not let our fighters continue to rush again enemy tanks armed only with a three-prong bomb. In late January, it was reported that Trần Đại Nghĩa had just manufactured bazookas in Ứng Hòa district. I immediately sent Phan Mỹ, chief of the ministry's secretariat, to the Armament Department. On his return, he brought back two bazookas with ten shells. They were conveyed at once to the troops on the Hà Nội front and I anxiously waited to hear the results of their test used in fighting.

On the afternoon of March 2, our troops destroyed two enemy tanks in Sơn Lộ with the newly-made bazookas as they advanced from Trúc Sơn to Trầm Pagoda, Quốc Oai. It was the first time that Vietnamese bazookas had destroyed French tanks. This exploit filled the troops with enthusiasm.

On the same afternoon, I went to Viên Nội to report to Uncle Hồ on the war and ask him to change his residence.

That night, Uncle Hồ left Viên Nội. Trần Đăng Ninh accompanied him, as previously arranged by the Standing Central Committee.

On the morning of March 3, Uncle Hồ arrived in Sơn Tây. There were crowds of evacuees, and the driver could not move the car forward. Trần Đăng Ninh suggested using a cart. No one among the mob recognized the old man in the cart, who had covered his head with a towel, as President Hồ Chí Minh.

In the evening, Uncle Hồ crossed the Đà River. On the other side of the river, in Trung Hà, he met Hoàng Văn Thái, who was on his

way back from the new High Command headquarters. Hoàng Văn Thái offered his car for Uncle Hồ to continue his journey.

Uncle Hồ remained in Cổ Tiết near the Bà Triệu rapids for some time. It was here that he gave the names of Trường, Kỳ, Kháng, Chiến, Nhất, Định, Thắng, and Lợi to the men who accompanied him. He often did this to maintain secrecy. But this time, he added: "Brothers, you are my living motto." Throughout the years of the resistance against the French, his team of close assistants consisted of the same men, and only them.

I stayed in Thạch Thán (Quốc Oai district) for a few more days. The French operation on the Hà Nội front proved all the clearer that our forces were not yet strong enough to check the French and resist their offensives. Our line stuck to their positions and waited for the enemy to arrive; they were utterly incapable of coping with the enemy's strong, rapid, and active operations. The French surrounded our forces, then they attacked us from the back which created great difficulties for us and led to the breakup of the front. I realized that it was necessary to drastically change the ideas of our officers so that they might respond in a more timely fashion to the ever-changing situation.

On March 6, I wrote the order "The Necessity of Shifting to Mobile Guerrilla Warfare." This was the second order on this subject within five weeks. The first one was signed by the Chief of the General Staff and was sent down to each section. The second order came from the High Command and contained more pressing content. It was like a private letter addressed to each zonal and regimental commander.

The order stressed that "mobile guerrilla warfare tactics must be boldly applied, that is to say:

> "the troops must be concentrated; their morale strengthened; the movement of troops must be rapid and secret for attacks against places where the enemy is relatively weak or has not

yet consolidated its position; after the attacks, troops must be withdrawn at once in order to prepare to attack other places. By doing so we will have to give up land in some places. We do not intend to keep land by any means."

"the main forces will be concentrated in order to launch large-scale battles; some detachments shall coordinate with the militia."

"to organize groups of fighters for the destruction of tanks."

"to step up the construction of barrages; the destruction of roads; the laying of obstacles on the dykes."

The order stressed the importance of applying mobile guerrilla warfare tactics consistently.

In March, there were no more cases of war fronts breaking up.

During the early period of the national resistance war, the troops naturally formed battle fronts. The French who were at first concentrated in the cities began to spread out in order to seize land and expand their zone of control. Our forces at the time were organized into regiments. Each time they encountered the enemy, they had to defend land and people. Therefore, fronts naturally formed. Although they fought bravely, our forces with their rifles, little ammunition, home-made grenades, and scimitars were not in a position to prevent the advance of French tanks. Our fronts broke up because our defenders did not understand the actual situation and change their fighting method.

In March, our forces began to apply mobile guerrilla warfare tactics, which proved effective in Nam Định and Hải Phòng. However, we suffered losses in Hà Đông. The Hà Nội war front command intended to secure a resounding victory after being forced to pull out of Inter-zone 1. On the night of March 20, at the same time as the attack against Hải Phòng city by ten companies of the national guards of Zone 3, the Hà Nội war front used a mixed force equivalent in size to one regiment to launch an attack on Hà Đông town which had been recently occupied by the French.

Determined to win the battle, almost all of our fighters were officers, regiment commanders taking the control of battalions, battalion commanders taking the leadership of companies, section leaders becoming fighters. The French were attacked unaware; many of them took up arms while still dressed in their underclothes. Yet, by relying on their fortifications and strong firepower, they succeeded in checking our offensive. At dawn, our troops had to withdraw. Our casualties equaled those of the French but we had lost many officers. We also lost nearly 100 rifles of various types. We had incorrectly planned to destroy the enemy completely in the town, while conditions were appropriate only for moderate surprise attack aimed at annihilating part of the enemy and then rapidly pulling out. Patriotic heroism could not by itself bring about victory. I felt that with our existing equipment and capabilities, we could not cope with the French in regiment-scale battles. Meanwhile, a battalion from the Capital City Regiment fought well against the French at Cầu Dặm, Chương Mỹ, Hà Đông.

The battle in Hà Đông town ended one fighting phase for our army and the people in the Hà Nội war front.

3

I left the Hà Nội war front about one week after Uncle Hồ.

Since the start of the hostilities there, organs of the Party Central Committee, the government, and the national front had stayed in villages located to the southwest of Hà Nội such as Đại Mỗ, Tây Mỗ, Mai Lĩnh, Trúc Sơn, Sài Sơn, Cần Kiệm, and Viên Nội. *The Voice of Việt Nam* was broadcast daily just 10 km from the capital. This led the enemy to believe that we would continue to move to the southwest where the territory and population were large and still unoccupied by the French. In early March the French aimed their attack at that region.

In reality we had moved to the northwest. Defensive units encircled our outlaying administrative department. The best defense at the time was secrecy. Our forces were not strong enough to stop French tanks and armored vehicles, let alone air raids and artillery pounding.

Trần Đăng Ninh had organized teams to raise the people's awareness of the resistance war and educate them on the need to keep secrecy, to maintain security, and to assist the local authorities in organizing the masses and the militia.

Many evacuees from Hà Nội also headed to the northwest. Quite a few came from the families of public servants; the resistance united people from all social strata. The evacuees had only knapsacks or kitbags as luggage. They did not know their final destination but wherever they went, they were cared for. The door of every house was open and they were welcomed like family members.

On the Sơn Tây–Trung Hà Road, I met Mrs. Tôn Thất Tùng in a rickshaw. Her husband, Tôn Thất Tùng was a professor at the Hà Nội Medical College. Many other professors from the College such as Vũ Đình Tụng, Hồ Đắc Di, and Đặng Văn Chung,[32] intellectuals who were respected by the French colonialists, joined the resistance. The majority of the intelligentsia, including well-known scientists, artists, public figures and even a number of religious leaders, took the path of resistance.

Early in the 1940s, articles ridiculing the French began to appear in Hà Nội newspapers. They claimed that if the Japanese invaded Indochina, the French would withdraw deep into the hinterland as had the Chinese. Summarizing this tactic which had been used by Kutuzov to resist Napoleon's army in Russia, Clausewitz concluded: "to apply it there must be immense space." Việt Nam,

32. They all were educated in France

however, was not a large country. The French appeared in many places throughout the country, their use of new military equipment narrowing the distance. Most of our units stuck to the enemy nevertheless, and continued fighting. Only the leading organs of the Party and government, the zonal and provincial authorities, withdrew to base areas. But even the remotest bases were separated from the enemy only by a day using motorized transport or a half hour using air-born forces. In this war, we had no safe rear area. Our withdrawals were in fact struggles with our adversary. After more than a year of fighting the French in Nam Bộ, we learned, however, that not only large bases in the resistance zone could stand firm, but also those adjacent to Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn.

After the central organs of the military command and government left Hà Nội front on March 21, the French command launched a large-scale operation against the region where our troops had been garrisoned. They searched everywhere hoping to capture the leaders of the resistance. They started from different directions. A detachment of motorized infantrymen advanced to Vân Đình from Hà Đông. Two battalions of infantrymen and a fleet of warships followed the Red River to land on Phủ Lý, from which they advanced to Chi Nê and then to Vân Đình. From Vân Đình, they pushed into Miếu Môn. In Nam Định, another infantry battalion advanced to Ninh Bình using warships and motor launches. Then they turned to Nho Quan. For this operation, 5,000 ground troops, a large number of tanks, warships, and planes had been mobilized. The French believed that the resistance leadership was heading in a southwestly direction. They did not know that we had long ago chosen the northwest. Uncle Hồ was returning to Tân Trào.

We carried out a "removal of capital" rarely found in war history. After three months of fighting in Hà Nội and suffering heavy losses, the French ended up seizing dead streets. There was no population, no electricity, no running water. All the administrative organs, factories, hospitals, and schools—all that made up the life of a

capital city had disappeared. General Salan himself was forced to admit: "Hà Nội has become an absolute vacuum."

4

Phú Thọ town on the Thao River had become a capital in miniature with tearooms, musical performances, theaters presenting plays by the Tự Do drama troupe, and women wearing the long dresses of Hà Nội ladies. Of course there were signs of war. These included slogans on the walls in French or German aimed at agitating enemy troops and bamboo pikes planted in the surrounding countryside to foil parachutists.

The animated atmosphere of the town revealed that many people did not yet understand the coming ordeal of the war. The government gave the order to destroy the houses and very soon there were none.

During my stay in Phú Thọ, I felt it was important to hold a military conference to review the situation after three months of fighting and to set new policies. The railway from Phú Thọ to Lao Cai still operated. I decided to find out what preparations for war had been made in the northwestern provinces before representatives arrived at the conference.

Under the French, Lao Cai was one of five military territories in North Việt Nam governed by the French army. I knew that sooner or later, French troops would find a way to return to this important position.

I journeyed to Lao Cai with Bằng Giang, the commander of Zone 10.

Lao Cai was the last town in North Việt Nam to be freed from the control of the pro-Chiang Kai-shek Việt Nam Nationalist Party. The local people were used to struggling with an enemy. From the town to the mountains everyone was busy with war

preparations. Only a few months later, Lao Cai would become one of the most dolorous locations on the northwestern war front for the French.

I returned from Lao Cai to Tiên Kiên in Phú Thọ province which was the venue of the second military conference, bringing with me a branch of peach blossom as a present for Uncle Hồ.

In recent months the French had engaged in motorized mobile warfare. After determining their target, they sent motorized forces from different places on roads along river dykes or through dry rice fields that were weakly defended by our side. Several prongs then concentrated on their target. In coastal areas or in places where a river route was available, they always made use of the waterways to land troops. In general, they attacked using the infantry, tanks, armored cars from the front with air and artillery support, and then suddenly sent in troops behind us or at our sides from amphibians or armoured motor launchers. They pushed us in the middle from both sides. They applied this tactic on Highway 5 and in Huế. Relying on their absolute superiority in motorized infantry, tanks, and armored vehicles, they would break our defenses and disrupt and scatter our ranks. The French offensives always involved encirclement, pronged attacks, and attacks from the rear.

Besides large operations, in some places the French also cleverly applied guerrilla tactics. In Sơn La, they used small groups of 10 to 12 soldiers who gathered in one place during the day and in another place at night. They then made surprise attacks on our forces from behind or on their flanks. In Huế, some French troops changed their positions several times in one night. They kept lamps lighted in places where there were no troops. Once they disguised themselves as civilians and our soldiers and attacked us unawares.

The French defense was organized very carefully. As soon as they arrived in one place, they immediately built defensive works. They dug trenches, piled up sand bags, positioned their firepower,

built barbed wire barriers, to which noisy objects like tin cans were attached, and planted pointed pikes to prevent surprise attacks. Their firepower was strong. They kept reserves of ammunition, food, and drinking water in case of a long-lasting siege. They even used dogs and monkeys as guard animals and employed Vietnamese traitors as spies.

They were obviously professional and crack troops.

By observing French preparations and tactics, we discovered many of our own shortcomings and weaknesses. We had a newly organized army, with insufficient training, weapons, and experienced commanders. Any revolutionary army has to undergo such a period of immaturity.

We concluded that the best school for the time being was the battlefield. We studied the fighting. Our foe was our teacher, helping us shorten our greenhorn period.

At the conference the measures to oppose enemy tactics were hotly debated. We needed tactics to actively attack our adversary in all situations. To that end, we knew we must understand the French and draw up fighting plans that were suitable and not too adventurous. Our aim was not only to grind down their forces but also to fight some major battles, capture prisoners of war, and seize weapons. Only by so doing could we build up our forces and strength.

We debated how to organize our base areas. Before the outbreak of countrywide resistance, this question had been raised. At the central, zonal, and provincial levels, we had foreseen the need for areas that could become bases once cities and towns were imminently jeopardized.

What was required to build such bases? Questions about the terrain and the people were most often discussed. Past experience in our country and in other places indicated that mountainous regions were best for the purpose. What about the plains? Our plains were

not large; each side of the Red River Delta was only a few hundred kilometers. Given the enemy's past use of that area, was it possible to build bases there?

On 5 November 1945, after the war was expanded in Nam Bộ, I wrote an article in the *Cứu Quốc* newspaper which read in part: "Guerrillas in a mountain and forest region rely on the terrain to advance or to draw back. In the plains, there are no mountains and forests, but there are mountains and seas of people. Thus if all the people are of the same mind, guerrilla fighters can hide among the people and act in absolute secrecy. They can appear and disappear magically in the same way as in mountains and forests. Without mountains, guerrillas can build barricades, pile earth, fell trees, and make dykes on the rivers to oppose the enemy's offensive."

The conference unanimously agreed that bases could be built in the plain if we had the people's support. The army and the people of Nam Bộ had proven this in the Mekong Delta provinces. It was necessary for us to create resistance bases in both the mountains and on the plains. When building bases in both areas, we gave equal importance to three aspects: military, political, and economic. Attention was paid to command and communication problems. Since French offensives could pass through any base, each zone and province had to prepare three reserve bases. Groups of underground fighters were needed to continue the resistance when bases fell into enemy control. In the plains, this was all the more true. Consequently, we gave underground teams and reserve bases special attention.

Regarding tactics, the conference concluded that: "After over three months of fighting, with only a weak army, we have gained experience through steel and blood. Our victories and failures as well as French actions have constituted precious lessons for us. We will continue to learn from actual fighting and from watching our enemy."

5

By early April 1947, our "capital" had been moved to Việt Bắc and the zonal and provincial leading organs had been moved to resistance bases. Over 40,000 tons of machinery and materials had been conveyed to safe places from Bình Trị Thiên to the north. In Bắc Bộ, nearly two thirds of the factories' machinery was removed in time. With this equipment, we established 57 arms-producing mills for the resistance war. Printing machines for newspapers and bank notes, schools, and hospitals were also brought in safely. The *Voice of Việt Nam* continued its transmissions; the voice of the resistance could not be hushed. The station was divided into two parts, each of which could replace the other if necessary.

Việt Bắc is a rugged region of mountains and forests comprising the provinces of Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn, Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, and Hà Giang. Uncle Hồ had entrusted Phạm Văn Đồng[33] and several other cadres with the task of consolidating the base area there. In late October 1946, immediately after his return from France, he dispatched Nguyễn Lương Bằng to Việt Bắc to make further preparations to turn this region into a resistance base. A number of working teams headed by Trần Đăng Ninh went there to get the *an toàn khu* (ATK—safety zones), ready.

The districts of Sơn Dương, Chiêm Hóa, and Na Hang in Tuyên Quang province; Định Hóa, Đại Từ, and Phú Lương in Thái Nguyên province; and Chợ Đồn and Chợ Rã in Bắc Cạn province were chosen to be safety zones. The General Staff decided on where to locate the branches of the Central Committee, the government, the High Command, and various mass organizations.

Initially, Uncle Hồ and the permanent Central Committee stayed in Chợ Chu, Định Hóa district. Uncle Hồ did not return

33. Later Prime Minister of the DRVN

immediately to Tân Trào, the capital of the August 1945 Revolution which was located in Sơn Dương district on the other side of the mountain range.

The districts chosen to be safety zones were originally regarded as remote and isolated areas with an unhealthy climate. Now many official branches of the government, military units, and families who had evacuated Hà Nội lived there, making them more animated and nicer. Many names previously unknown to most people such as Bình Ca, Đa Năng, Khế Pass, Cao Vân, Phú Minh, Quảng Nạp, Quán Vuông, Ba Giăng, Cù Vân, and Bờ Đậu became familiar. Some places which had no name before, were now named. For example, if a beverage shop was opened by an old man, the place was soon called "the old man's shop."

Uncle Hồ wrote to the highlanders, praising their traditional patriotism and their active participation in the resistance. He called upon them to assist the army and to strive to increase the production of rice, corn, and potatoes. He also issued 12 pieces of advice aimed at reminding officials and soldiers of what was to be done or to be avoided to win the people's confidence and admiration.

Beginning in March 1947, Trường Chinh wrote a series of articles in the *Sự Thật* magazine, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Việt Nam, to explain our policies on national resistance in detail and to instruct people on the resistance war. Those articles were titled *'Against Whom do We Fight?' 'The Characteristics of Our Resistance War,' 'The Form of the War against the French Colonialists,' 'Three Phases of the Lasting War,' and 'Comparison of Advantages and Disadvantages.'* They were later collected in a book entitled *"Our Resistance Is Bound to Win."* They were an important contribution to the education, organization, and encouragement of the army and the people who were determined to bring the resistance war to a final victory.

Immediately after the Standing Central Committee's arrival in the Việt Bắc base, on 3 April 1947, the second conference of central

cadres was convened.[34] The conference lasted four days, and examined all political, military, economic, and cultural questions relating to the resistance war. It discussed measures for implementing a lasting resistance policy which combined fighting and national construction.

Politically, the conference called for the consolidation and expansion of a united front against the French colonial regime, the organization of new mass organizations, and the winning over of the Catholics and the ethnic minorities.

Militarily, the conference concluded that: "Việt Nam cannot shift from a defensive position to an offensive one like Russia. On the contrary, it must undergo a long and difficult period of fighting and, simultaneously, striving to strengthen our troops and to better equip them, thereby changing our weak position into a strong one and eliminating the enemy's superiority in equipment and technique."

We foresaw that a protracted resistance war would include three phases. During the first phase, the enemy would use motorized troops to launch rapid, large-scale operations and expand their zone of occupation. We would retaliate against the French by slowing down their advance, at the same time preserving our strength, avoiding disadvantageous battles, and withdrawing a portion of our forces when necessary.

In the second phase, using tactics such as terrorism, "clean sweeps," and blockades, the French would try to set up a puppet government and to induce us to surrender. We would continue to strengthen our forces and to expand mobile guerrilla warfare. The entire population had to become involved, even in enemy-controlled areas, and large cities. Only through widespread guerilla warfare could we shift to the offensive.

34. The Conference of the CPV's Central Standing Committee

The third phase would begin when the enemy was weakened and our forces had matured. Then the subjective and objective conditions would be ripe for us to concentrate our forces and use mobile warfare, combining guerrilla warfare and pitched battles. Offensives would prevail on all fronts and we would annihilate the enemy and recover the areas we had lost to the French.

Viewing the resistance war as comprising three phases accorded with the principle the balance of force between two sides. It helped our army and people to understand the tactical tasks of each phase in order to make the utmost effort to secure victories. It also helped avoid impatience. Our plans were based on the circumstances that existed between our people and the French, an imperialist power much weakened after World War II. We did not foresee the underhanded schemes of the American imperialists, who gradually deepened their interference in the Indochinese war and then replaced the French when the latter lost the war. Our analysis was correct for the initial phase of the resistance war, but developments during the subsequent period were much more complicated.

At the conference we reaffirmed that our "fundamental tactic was mobile guerrilla warfare." We stressed that a movement of the militia and guerrillas must be launched and that the entire population must be armed. All villages were to be built into resistance villages, and part of our troops were to be turned into guerrilla militiamen (especially those in the areas under temporary control of the enemy).

The question of bases was raised again and hotly debated. The Conference resolved: "Việt Nam cannot have as large or as solid bases as China. Those in Việt Nam can be attacked and encircled. However, Việt Nam has an united national front; the people enjoy a broadly democratic regime and will sacrifice their lives to defend it... Việt Nam can wage a resistance war and is sure to win by opening a battlefield wherever the enemy comes, by fighting them

even in their rear areas, and by organizing bases in both the mountains and on the plains."

Economically, the Conference resolved to destroy the enemy's economy while building our own. We sought to have a self-sufficient economy in order to wage the resistance and to carry out national construction.

Culturally, the Conference advocated the mobilization of the intelligentsia and artists to participate in the resistance through education aimed at building a new national, scientific, and popular culture.

Five months after the outbreak of countrywide resistance, the CPV had mapped out its general plan for waging the war and building the country. It also had outlined the main measures that had to be taken to achieve victory.

In May 1947, the High Command convened the first conference of the militia in Việt Bắc.

After the resistance war broke out, Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee concluded that a unified command of all armed forces was necessary. On 12 February 1947, a militia division was set up under the High Command to help it lead and command the militia and self-defence corps. Khuất Duy Tiến and Lê Liêm were appointed chief and deputy chief of the division. The same month, the Defence Ministry issued a circular inducting all citizens aged 18 to 45 into militia and self-defence corps which included militiamen in the villages and "self-guards" *(tự vệ)* in factories, offices, and streets. The tasks of the militia and local guerrillas were also defined.

In March, the government changed the name of the High Command of the National Army to the High Command of the National Army and Self-defence Militia, and militia commands were set up under the Resistance Committees of each province, district, and commune.

The next month, the Party Central Committee resolved that "each village and locality will designate a competent national salvation cadre to take charge of the development of the militia."

From the armed wings of the various national salvation bodies of the Việt Minh in each locality, the self-guards and militia were merged with the State's armed forces under the leadership of the High Command and its military. The combined force numbered over one million men in the summer of 1947. A national militia conference was convened to unify the command structure and to clearly define the militia's strategic role in the resistance. On this occasion, Uncle Hồ sent a letter to all militiamen that read in part: "The self-guards and the guerrillas are the forces of the whole nation. They constitute an invincible force, the iron wall of the Fatherland. However cruel or violent the enemy may be, they will disintegrate once they strike that force and that wall."

In summing up the first six months of the resistance, the High Command concluded: "Only by arming the whole people, by combining the fighting abilities of the army, the militia and local guerrilla units everywhere can villages become fortresses and the enemy be paralysed—besieged and attacked unawares and driven to bitter failure."

The resistance villages, also referred to as fighting villages, initially emerged in opposition to the Japanese. They were well developed in Nam Bộ after 6 March 1946, forming resistance bases. Provinces and districts to the enemy's rear in Nam Bộ had mutually-linked bases spanning two to three districts or five to six communes. The Standing Central Committee coined the motto: "Each village forms a fortress!" The resistance villages developed along with the enhancement of the militia. Thousands of resistance villages were built. A conference of key CPV cadres in 1947 fully appreciated the "enthusiasm of the rural masses in joining the militia, organizing the resistance villages, helping the troops in their operations, hindering the enemy's advance, and so on. It was actually a revolutionary movement of the peasants."

Half a year after the outbreak of the resistance, we had fundamental principles and forms of organization in place which reflected the spirit and the idea behind a new type of warfare, that of the people.

6

In France, Paul Ramadier replaced Leon Blum as prime minister of the government. On 13 March 1947 he told the French National Assembly, "The Indochinese problem cannot be solved by force" and appointed a new High Commissioner to replace d'Argenlieu who was recalled because of his obvious hunger for war. Valluy, however, remained commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary corps.

On March 19, the French Communist Party adopted a resolution on the Indochinese war: "The Central Committee reaffirms the necessity of putting an end to the hostile actions in Indochina, of resuming negotiations with the Vietnamese government and president Hồ Chí Minh on the basis of the 6 March 1946 Agreement, and of respecting the independence and unity of the DRVN within the framework of Indochinese Federation and the French Union."

On March 21, from the Việt Bắc base, President Hồ Chí Minh broadcast a speech on the *Voice of Việt Nam*: "We solemnly declare that the Vietnamese people's only desire is independence and unity within the French Union. We will respect the economic and cultural interests of France in Việt Nam. If the French government officially declares and sincerely recognizes the independence and unity of Việt Nam, and guarantees the implementation of that political reality, all other problems can be easily solved (...) If the French do not pay attention to our sincere aspirations for peace and continue the war, they will lose everything and have nothing."

In early April, Bollaert, who replaced d'Argenlieu, came to Sài Gòn.

On the 19th, Uncle Hồ sent a message of peace to the French people and government: "Việt Nam is struggling for its independence and unity. France, as prime minister Ramadier has stated, does not oppose the independence and unity of Việt Nam (...) Protracted war can only increase hatred and lead to more human losses (...) The appointment of a new French High Commissioner seems to reflect the intention of the French government to change its political line towards Việt Nam and embark on a new path worthy of France (...) To express the sincere desire for peace and friendship with the French people, the Vietnamese government proposes that the French government immediately to stop all hostile actions and start negotiations for a peaceful solution of the conflict."

Once the national resistance began, there was no more contact between Việt Nam and France. Now and then our representative met with the US and British consuls and the Red Cross representative, mainly to solve the question of "French prisoners of war."

Early in May, Hoàng Minh Giám[35] met the British consul near the Đuống Bridge. After a few minutes, the latter asked:

"Do you know Mr. Paul Mus? He met you in Hà Nội and met with President Hồ Chí Minh before 19 December 1946.

"Yes. That's right.

"Mr. Paul Mus wishes to meet you. He has followed me to the other side of the Đuống Bridge, about 1 km away from here, and is waiting there. If you agree to receive him, he will come here at once.

35. An intellectual who joined the resistance, later became Minister of Culture of the DRVN

"What is the purpose of the meeting, do you know?

"A very important matter. He earnestly wishes to meet you. He is now a close assistant, an adviser to High Commissioner Bollaert.

"All right. Please tell Mr. Paul Mus that I am willing to meet him."

A short moment later, Paul Mus came. After the greetings, he said:

"I have an important, confidential, and pressing subject. I would like to meet President Hồ Chí Minh. I am entrusted to convey directly to the President a message from High Commissioner Bollaert. If possible, I am prepared to follow you immediately."

"To my regret, it cannot be done in this way. I shall report to the President and give you his answer. Please tell me in what way the answer can reach you quickly and secretly."

"Thank you. Please answer me through the radio."

Paul Mus agreed with Hoàng Minh Giám on the convention to use for arranging their liaison.

Uncle Hồ accepted the meeting with Paul Mus who had been in Indochina since the 1930s as a professor of archeology. He knew Chinese script and spoke Vietnamese fluently. After 6 March 1946, he returned to Hà Nội as a political adviser to Leclerc.

In mid-May 1947, Paul Mus was met by a man from our side at the Đuống Bridge. The professor enthusiastically followed his guide and walked in the dark to Thái Nguyên town.

In the evening of May 12, Uncle Hồ met Paul Mus.

As Hoàng Minh Giám described it, Bollaert's envoy was astounded when he saw President Hồ Chí Minh in the light of an incandescent lamp sitting in the only intact house left in the ruined town. Uncle Hồ was as always simple and as courteous as if he were receiving guests in the government reception room at Ngô Quyền Street in Hà Nội.

"My president," Paul Mus said, "I thank you for receiving me so that I can fulfill the task entrusted by the High Commissioner which is to convey to you a message."

Uncle Hồ asked him to hand him the message, but Paul Mus continued saying:

"My president, for reasons inconvenient to discuss, the message in answer to your government's proposed ceasefire, is not available in writing. I have learned its content by heart. Allow me to repeat it word by word."

"I am listening to you."

Paul Mus spoke at length:

"To have a ceasefire, the High Commissioner in Indochina points out four conditions to Mr. President. First, Vietnamese troops are to give their weapons to France. Second, French troops are free to move in Vietnamese territory. Third, the Vietnamese government is to return to France all arrested people. Fourth, the Vietnamese government is to return to France all foreigners who have crossed over to the Vietnamese side."

Uncle Hồ's features became stern, but his tone remained calm.

"Mr. Mus, I know that you fought against Hitler's fascism with the French people, is it right?

"My president. That is true."

"Answer me then, in my position, what would your reaction be to Mr. Bollaert's message? Would you accept the conditions?"

Paul Mus appeared embarrassed.

Uncle Hồ continued:

"I was told that Mr. Bollaert also participated in the resistance against Hitler and did many good deeds. Consider the conditions he has asked for a ceasefire, what meaning do they have? They mean that he wants us to surrender! Mr. Mus, do you think that we can

surrender? And the condition regarding foreigners fighting in the ranks of the Vietnamese people against colonialism! Only vile and base people could accept such conditions."

Uncle Hồ stared at Paul Mus. Paul Mus kept quiet. Then he nodded and said:

"I understand, Mr. President, I understand..."

The message was no longer referred to. Uncle Hồ spoke about the position of the government and people of Việt Nam: To love peace, to desire good relations with the French people, but to be determined to fight for the defense of their independence and the unity of the country. Paul Mus recognized that these were legitimate feelings and promised to report fully the President's views to Bollaert.

Before leaving, Paul Mus seemed to be emotional. He wished good health to the President, and then asked:

"Mr. President, so the war will go on?"

"We desire peace, but not at any price! It must be peace with independence and freedom."

"Mr. President, good courage to you."

"Certainly, I always have enough courage."

An aide brought a few glasses of champagne. Paul Mus emptied his glass then disappeared in the dark.

Five years later, in his book *The Việt Nam War from a Social Point of View,* Paul Mus criticized the content of the message he had to convey to President Hồ Chí Minh in Thái Nguyên.

Thirteen days after the meeting with Paul Mus, along with a letter addressed to the French people, Uncle Hồ wrote to our people:

"For the sake of humanity, peace, and good relations with the French people, our government has proposed to the French government a way to end the war on the basis of our aspirations for

independence and unity. Nevertheless, the French militarists and colonialists, accustomed to cruelty, inhumanity, and rudeness have shown their contempt for our army and people and proposed insolent and arrogant conditions (...) They have insisted on our surrender (...) Be assured, we will not accept the loss of our land.

"Therefore, on behalf of the government, I appeal to you to do your utmost to resist and to help our troops fight the aggressors. I order the army, the militia, and the self-defence corps to fight the enemy resolutely and to annihilate them.

"Each citizen must be a combatant. Each village must be a battle trench.

"We must accept sacrifices and fight to wipe out the militarists and colonialists and recover our unity and independence."

This was the last contact between Uncle Hồ and a representative of the other side during the resistance war against the French.

General Võ Nguyên Giáp visiting the Capital Regiment on 22 February 1947 upon its withdrawal from Hà Nội to Thượng Hội, Đan Phượng, Hà Đông

Trần Đại Nghĩa introducing the recoilless gun SKZ30 and the accompanying shell to General Giáp

CHAPTER III

A CALM SUMMER

In the summer, the battlefronts calmed down to a certain extent.

Along Highway 5, the French conducted small sweeps aimed at pushing the guerrillas back from the villages along the route and creating a safety corridor for their military operations and movements.

In mid-May, a battalion of French troops parachuted into Phú Thọ town. The next day, enemy warships and launches brought a few hundred troops from Hà Nội to Việt Trì town. Both Phú Thọ and Việt Trì had just been completely destroyed, not a single man was seen. Only a few days later, these two contingents pulled out.

In June, French infantry, in coordination with the parachutists, advanced to Chợ Bờ but they did not stay there long.

Were these exploratory operations?

In Central Việt Nam, the French withdrew from Hồi Xuân and fought some small battles in Bình Trị Thiên. They also attacked Phú Đa and An Khê but withdrew when our forces fought back.

In Zone 6, they launched a number of small offensives in Củng Sơn.

The phenomenon of seasonal war had appeared. In the North, summer is the rainy season. Rivers are high, hindering large operations using motorized troops. On the other hand, the French

had suffered losses and were exhausted after fighting in the cities and many offensives. They needed time to relax and consolidate while waiting for reinforcements.

Our forces also needed time to readjust their organization. Their forces had to be completed and trained to stage several battles so that the French had no time to prepare for future offensives.

In North Việt Nam, the troops of Zones 2, 3, and 12 repeatedly ambushed the enemy, destroyed many of their motorized vehicles, and twice made surprise incursions into Hà Đông town. Zone 4 fought the French in Mỹ Chánh, An Phú, and Ưu Điểm. Zone 5 laid many ambushes on the Hải Vân pass and broke the prongs of the French's large offensive on Phú Phong. Zone 6 three times entered Phan Thiết town. The armed forces and people of Nam Bộ, responding to the 28 February 1947 Resolution of the Zonal Party Committee, fought throughout the summer to foil the French's sweep operations, to destroy communication lines, harass the towns, and sabotage the enemy's economic bases.

In general, the summer activities were remarkable in Nam Bộ and Zones 3 and 6. The battles in Nam Bộ were very effective. However, the summer activities were still limited because in many places our forces did not yet understand how to fight, and the cadres were not well trained, thus their real strength was diminished.

How should battles be fought? We had to answer this question before the end of the rainy season.

During the first months when I was entrusted by Uncle Hồ with the task of organizing the *Việt Nam Tuyên Truyền Giải Phóng Quân* (Việt Nam Propagation Liberation Army), I often wondered what motivated fighters to spring up and run forward in the face of deafening enemy fire? After experiencing fighting, I realized that it was bravery stemming from a belief in their ability to win. On all battlefields, our army and people showed great gallantry. But there were also cases that caused us to think. A number of officers and

men who had fighting experience and who had undergone training, because frightened, left their comrades, and ran away from the battle front. At the same time, the fighters of the Capital City Regiment, mostly Hanoians who were using arms and fighting for the first time, asked to remain in besieged Hà Nội to continue fighting after they were ordered to pull out. The crucial point was that when fighters had an effective method of striking the enemy and of protecting themselves, their bravery increased. A commander could not demand that his soldiers be brave or rely only on their gallantry, unless he found effective ways to win victory with minimal losses. This was the way to nurture and enhance the bravery of the troops. The process of commanding is precisely the process of discovering and creating the most efficient methods of fighting an enemy.

When I was writing for the newspaper *Tiếng Dân* (The Voice of the People), I never intended to join the military. I used to follow the brave fighting of the Chinese Red Army. I read many documents about Mao Tse-tung and Zhou De. During my years as a journalist in Hà Nội, from 1935 to 1940, I wrote about the Eight Army, the New Forth Army, and the border region of Tấn Ký Sát in a column called "Comments on the World Situation." I also wrote a book entitled "To Understand the Military Situation in China," which included many maps. I wrote this book thinking that our people could apply the fighting experience of the Chinese Revolution.

Among the documents I carried with me when leaving Hà Nội, there was the French translation by Denise Naville of the book *On War*.[36] The book deals in a detailed way with many issues regarding the nature of wars and military strategies and tactics. As we approached the outbreak of war, I paid much attention to this book. Before that, I thought Clausewitz was talking about wars in the

36. Karl von Clausewitz (1780 - 1831), Prussian military philosopher

previous century and I disagreed with him that a guerrilla warfare could be waged only in an immense country like Russia.

During evenings of leisure, sitting by the fireplace in a house on stilts, either my secretary or my wife Bích Hà[37] read aloud from the book. At times, I felt as if the author was sitting in front of me, commenting on current events. Clausewitz understood the extremely fluctuations of war. He compared war to a gambling party because it contained so many random factors. I specially liked a relatively short chapter in the book about "arming the people." I paid attention to the part which discussed what the author called "a small war." It agreed with what our forefathers had said about "using a weaker force to fight a stronger one," "using a small number of troops to fight a larger contingent," and "using short-term fighting to win victory over an enemy's long campaign." Clausewitz wrote: "A small war is characterized by the fact that small units can go any place, that they can supply themselves, keep their presence secret, move rapidly, withdraw even in places which have no roads, and so on."

Did what we were doing have similarities with the so-called small war?

2

Prior to the August 1945 Revolution, Uncle Hồ had several times disagreed with insurrections that had been carried out separately in various locations that did not meet the criteria of mobile guerrilla war. In his view, they would lead to failure because the enemy would be able to concentrate its forces for repression. The revolution could only succeed when the strength of the whole nation was mobilized and each opportunity was grasped. He had

37. They had just married for a few months

done his utmost to avoid war in the past because the international situation was not propitious for us. The Soviet Union was busy healing its war wounds, stabilizing internal situations in Eastern Europe, and coping with the Cold War. In China, as of June 1946, Chiang Kai-shek had concentrated millions of troops to attack liberated areas. The Red Army was forced to pull out of Yan An.[38] The large units of guerrillas were subjected to violent sweeps. Việt Nam's resistance would be isolated, encircled by anti-communism, and would not receive international material and moral support. However, nothing could help us avoid war.

During that summer, we had a mountain of work to do.

The resistance government had to establish bases for a self-sufficient economy under war conditions. A stagnant economy would be impossible; food and clothes had to be ensured for the people and our armed forces.

The Government reduced land rents by 25 percent and divided abandoned lands among poor peasants which brought them closer to the new regime. Under the motto "All the people must promote production," the production of food became an obligation. The labour force shortage caused by the mobilization of youths into the army and militia was remedied by organizing labour exchanges and pools, and by working in rotation.

The Defense Ministry reserved part of our troops for direct production work and organized the first State farms. Wherever they lived the troops produced food on a small scale. The defense of fields became a pressing need. The French destroyed crops and agricultural tools, plundered food, and killed cattle to deprive the Việt Minh of needed food supplies. Our army and the militia were responsible for fighting the enemy and helping the people harvest and hide crops.

38. The revolutionary base of the Chinese Red Army

Uncle Hồ wrote to the people, reminding them of the need to protect dykes: "We must make every effort to prevent floods, just as we opposed the foreign invaders...

"All the village will flounder if there is flood,

"To prevent it, husband and wife must join efforts."

In 1947, 1,300,000 cubic meters of earth were added to the dykes to reinforce them. When regions became war zones, the acreage cultivated with rice was reduced, but overall rice productivity for the country did not fall much compared to the previous year. The acreage planted with subsidiary crops actually increased significantly.

The government encouraged the development of handicraft and cottage industry. Special attention was given to the manufacture of arms and the exploitation of raw materials. The guiding principle for the development of industry and handicraft was "small scale, dispersed organization, the use of rudimentary instruments in combination with machines, reliance on the people and on raw materials available in the locality, independence of the locality, and production for self-sufficiency."

Early in June, we had organized about 200 bases of agricultural, handicraft, and cottage industry which employed 40,000 evacuees. We had also organized small-scale farms and production collectives designed to operate on a long-term basis.

The High Command decreed that arsenals and a system of factories for the manufacture and repairing of arms be set up. There were militia arms factories, those of the public security service, and those belonging to the trade unions in the zones and provinces. Engineers and workers "resurrected" many damaged machines, improved or adapted inappropriate machines, exploited raw materials to produce gun powder, recovered unexploded bombs and shells, and searched for Japanese and French weapons sunk in rivers. During the second half of 1947, in the region north of Zone 5, our arms factories

produced 133,101 tons of weapons of all kinds. In Nam Bộ, arms production bases had been established the previous year and maintained operation under very difficult conditions.

Uncle Hồ attached great importance to making the rear a solid moral and material base for the front. He encouraged the people to consider soldiers as their own children. On his initiative, a movement was launched among the people to organize "associations of combatants' mothers," to make "winter clothes for the combatants," and to keep "pots of rice for the combatants." Uncle Hồ himself kept a rice pot.

The Government decided that the 27th of July would be "War Invalids Day" so that "our people might express their gratitude, humanity, and love for our wounded soldiers," as Uncle Hồ wrote in his letter to the people gathered at the meeting in Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên province.

Caring for war invalids became a popular movement. Wounded soldiers coming from the Hà Nội front to Việt Bắc were eagerly welcomed into families and taken care of or accepted as adopted children. Many girls married them.

The affection and assistance of the population in rear areas for our soldiers was not only a great encouragement for those who were fighting at the front but also for youths joining the army.

The total number of national guards at the beginning of the war was 85,000 men. By 1947 it had climbed to 120,000.

On August 26, the Government set up an independent division under the High Command.

Although the number of our forces had significantly increased, the quality of their equipment had not substantially improved. Besides the newly-produced bazookas, mortars and anti-tank hand grenades, old rifles were still used and there was little ammunition. There were about 30,000 light arms for the whole army; most of them were rifles of twenty different types.

Most of the soldiers' clothes were those they had brought from home. Many units, even long after their formation, did not receive army supplied clothing. Our soldiers bought rubber sandals with their own money and plaited their own hats. Their water bottles and bowls were made of bamboo, their knapsacks and hand grenade pouches made of rattan. From Việt Bắc to Zone 4, Zone 5, and Nam Bộ, the army could only satisfy part of the troop's material requirements.

In August, the High Command opened a refresher course for middle class army cadres in La Bằng commune, Đại Từ district, Thái Nguyên province. Uncle Hồ attended the inauguration ceremony and made recommendations to the participants. He said, "Being a commander, you are responsible with regard to discipline, to the combatants, to the people, even to the enemy. A commander must love his soldiers and take care of them, at rest and in battle... If the soldiers have no rice to eat, no warm clothes to wear, no place to sleep... the commander should not eat his fill, keep himself warm, or sleep soundly. He must study politics, strategies, tactics, the art of commanding industriously in order to win victory over the enemy with the least loss of soldiers and civilians, and to shorten the days of their suffering."

3

Not long after the meeting between Uncle Hồ and Paul Mus, we knew what the French authorities wanted.

After accepting the Marshall plan, France was completely dependent upon the United States. Ramadier came to power, replacing Prime Minister Blum, and reflecting the complete inclination of the French administration to the right. De Gaulle reappeared on the political stage with a movement to assemble the French people. In the first half of May, French communists who were in charge of a number of ministries were expelled from the government. Coste Floret, the

Minister of Defence, stated openly at the Indochinese Committee of the Popular Republican Movement: "France refuses to negotiate with the Hồ Chí Minh government not because of the events of 19 December 1946, but because of his relations with Moscow."

The French government, however, could not ignore the struggle of the French Communist party, part of the Socialist Party, and progressive elements among the French people who demanded respect for the new constitution, opposed old-style colonial domination, and demanded that the Vietnamese be allowed to decide their own political fate including the problem of independence or unity within the French Union. Ramadier had promised to negotiate with competent representatives from Việt Nam. The French prime minister avoided precisely stating who that competent representative would be.

The April 19 peace message of President Hồ Chí Minh embarrassed the French government. Ramadier could not refuse so reasonable and sensible a proposal as that sent by the Vietnamese government. The request to "immediately ending hostile actions" was precisely what the French colonialists in Indochina did not want. The operation of the Massu armored division and the activities of French warships and motor launches on the Bắc Bộ battlefield over the past few months had given Valluy the illusion that a military victory was approaching. A ceasefire would give the Vietnamese side an opportunity to improve its military situation. What Valluy wanted now was to have his forces launch a large-scale, lightning offensive in coordination with a political scheme to end the Indochinese war.

High Commissioner Bollaert had sent Paul Mus to meer Uncle Hồ as a counteraction, but the conditions he brought were unacceptable. These proposals were verbally conveyed. Paul Mus had promised to send the official text a few days later, but we never received it.

On May 14, Bollaert went to Hà Nội. A piece of theatre then began. Three "parliament members of the opposite faction in the

People's Congress of Việt Nam" (members of the 70-man delegation that Chiang Kai-shek troops had introduced into the National Assembly without being elected) who had sided with the French, now proposed that France could negotiate only with the former Emperor Bảo Đại and entrusted him with the task of forming a nationalist government composed of competent and prestigious men in the eyes of the people.

On May 20, in Sài Gòn, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, on behalf of the "National United Front" praised Vĩnh Thụy[39] as "an ardent patriot standing above the parties" and attacked our government as having followed a sectarist and authoritarian policy.

On May 24, Bollaert came to Huế. A number of mandarins from the Huế court received the High Commissioner and sounded the same tune.

In Sài Gòn, under the conductor Didier Michel, Bollaert's new political adviser, the symphony became louder. A number of people shouted: "The former Emperor Bảo Đại is the worthy representative of Việt Nam for negotiating with France!" Others loudly opposed the unification of the three *Kỳ*, demanding an autonomous Nam Kỳ: "Nam Kỳ must be permanently separated from Việt Nam!"

On July 5, Vĩnh Thụy stated in an interview in Hong Kong: "If the people of Việt Nam have confidence in me (...), I shall be happy to return to Indochina. I do not support or oppose the Việt Minh. I do not belong to any party."

This does not mean however, that Bollaert did not face opposition in many places. In Sài Gòn, a delegation headed by Nguyễn Văn Tỵ went to the High Commissioner's office with a declaration signed by 300 intellectuals demanding that

39. i.e. Emperor Bảo Đại, who then already abdicated

negotiations be started with the Hồ Chí Minh government. The Sài Gòn press several times repeated the same demand. Early in August, Leon Blum and Claude Bourdet wrote in *Le Populaire* and the *Combat* and insisted on Bollaert"s continued negotiations with President Hồ Chí Minh. Blum wrote: "A few days ago, I officially received a private letter from Mr. Hồ Chí Minh. He is still the legitimate and worthy representative of the Vietnamese people (...) and at this very moment he has given us indisputable evidence of his prudence, patriotism, and selflessness (...) There is light in Indochina. This light must become dawn and then daylight."

On September 15, the Standing Central Committee of the Party issued the instruction: "What does Bollaert say? What should we do?" It said: "The army and people of Việt Nam realize clearly that without using violence to smash the aggressive scheme of the French colonialists, it will be impossible to secure independence and unification...The way has been mapped out. We must be confident in our strength. To have freedom and independence, we must fight resolutely...It is not people like Bollaert who will set conditions for us, rather it will be our own strong cohesion and the struggle of our people as well as the French people that will compel the French reactionary colonialists to submit."

During the time Bollaert, on behalf of the French government, tried to find a political solution in Việt Nam, Uncle Hồ made several statements. His reasonable and sensible words and the concrete measures he proposed to end the conflict, as one historian has written, "at times, drove the Ramadier government to the wall."

The French government had shown its determination to restore its domination of the Indochinese peninsula. Along with Bollaert's political maneuvers, French reinforcements continued to be sent to Indochina.

4

I went to Bắc Cạn and Cao Bằng in mid-August.

During the first days of the provisional government, I had been Minister of Internal Affairs. Within the Party, I was responsible for military affairs as well as being the secretary of the government's Party Committee. Lê Văn Hiến was Deputy Secretary. As secretary of the Party Committee of the government, Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee sent me to the zones and provinces to deal with problems concerning the Party and the administration. On this trip I had to make a statement on behalf of the government on the *Voice of Việt Nam* for the second anniversary of National Day. Both the main and the reserve sections of the broadcasting station were situated near Bắc Cạn.

While I was speaking through the microphone, a loud cock was crowing. I knew this crowing was transmitted everywhere. "National Day this year announced the dawn of the resistance war," one worker at the broadcasting station joked.

Returning from Cao Bằng, I felt confident about the fall and winter's preparations at the northern frontier. I did not know then what a surprise the dry season would bring in Bắc Cạn.

From mid-June to late September, the High Command had convened two successive military conferences.

In the French war, military conferences were actually short training courses for commanders. They lasted one to three days, rarely longer. Each time, new problems were discussed. Participants arrived at the conference hopeful; they left happy since their concerns had been solved. They also felt a little more mature.

At the second military conference, we realized that our military knowledge was too scanty, and we resolved to learn even from the actions of our enemy. But if we learned all of our enemy's tactics, we would not be able to apply them because it would take us a long

time to acquire the weapons, equipment, and fighting capability of a professional army. One thing we did learn was the need to find out our own way of fighting. We had discovered methods to deal with certain French tactics, but we had yet to touch upon fundamental questions and to identify principles that could guide the actions of our officers and helped them apply strategies and tactics.

At a third military conference in mid-June, the tactical principles of our armed forces were developed.

The conference unanimously endorsed eleven principles.

First principle: To firmly keep the initiative.

Our past experience on the battlefield had proved that even with a comparative imbalance of force, the results of the fighting would favour us if we could keep the initiative. Passiveness was usually followed by losses. We knew we must hold the initiative in offenses as well as withdrawals. Even if victory was not achieved, at least this would keep our losses to the minimum. The resolution stated: "Strategically as well as tactically, we must firmly keep the initiative. Part of the fighting of our troops should be aimed at countering enemy operations, mostly through pre-planned battles assigned to foil their plans and fulfill our goals."

I should add that the following 30 years of the resistance war had involved securing and preserving strategic and tactical initiatives between our side and the enemy's. Victory was on the side which kept the initiative. Doing so reflected the idea and spirit of striking offensively against the enemy. This is the first principle guiding the ideas and actions of our cadres when applying battle strategies and tactics. It controls almost all following actions. It might even be said that this is the foundation principle in the military art of Việt Nam during two resistance wars.

Second principle: "To know of our forces and those of the enemy."

In fighting, our commanders revealed two weak points. They did not clearly understand the spirit and capabilities of their troops or

the effectiveness of the weapons available to them. Nor did they understand the enemy. This weakness had to be corrected at once, otherwise there could be no logical use of military forces.

It is what our forefathers said long ago: know oneself and know the opponent, then the hundred battles fought will be victorious. Now it was all the more important, because of the great discrepancy in strength between the French and our side, a discrepancy never before seen in our history of fighting against foreign invasion.

Third principle: Know how to use reserve forces.

In order to keep the initiative on the battlefield, it is crucial to have reserve forces and to know how to use them. The resolution decided: "Every unit must have a reserve force. Every zone must have its main forces, that is the zonal reserve force. The High Command must have its main force under its direct command, that is the reserve force of the whole country."

Fourth principle: Know how to concentrate forces when necessary and to mobilize them quickly.

Fifth principle: Keep force strength secret in order to mislead the enemy.

Sixth principle: Attack when the enemy least expects it and take advantage of their weak points.

Seventh principle: Coordinate strategies and tactics.

Eighth principle: Coordinate the operations of the main forces, the guerrillas, and the militia.

Ninth principle: Attach more importance to annihilation battles.

Tenth principle: Map out realistic and clear-cut plans.

Eleventh principle: Stay as advanced as the enemy. If possible, keep ahead of them.

The extreme inequality between ourselves and the French in experience and equipment did not allow us to make mistakes or

deviate from these major principles. Looking back, we can see that the major principles formulated during the first months of national resistance were consistently applied throughout the two resistance wars.

A fourth military conference was convened from September 27 to 29. The dry season was coming, and big offensives might occur at any moment. The difficult task for the conference was to guess what offensive scheme the French would use and to decide on counter measures. We wanted to prevent them from waging rapid war and winning a quick victory.

From the beginning we had paid attention to intelligence work, but having no experience and no real organization, we could not uncover the enemy's plans. The main source of information we used was the French press and radio and those of other Western countries. Through these we learned about the activities of French politicians and generals and the movements of the French expeditionary corps on various battlefields. In September, we learned that the French had acquired 20,000 more men, including parachutists and North African troops. Salan had replaced Dephes as commander of the French troops in North Indochina. He had been in Indochina since colonial days, therefore he knew the northern mountain region of Việt Nam well. I was informed that Salan often made inspection tours of the northern border, the northeast, and the midlands by air. Furthermore, the parachutists, the North Africans, and their Vietnamese puppet troops were all trained in waging jungle warfare.

I reported to the conference on the situation of various warfronts, on the status of our forces compared to the French and the envisaged activity of the enemy, and then I gave my remarks.

The conference rapidly concluded that during the coming autumn and winter, the French would strive to capture the leading organs of our resistance, to smash the main forces of the Việt Minh, to destroy our bases, and to create the conditions for the birth of a

quisling government. Thereafter, their war of reconquest would gradually be turned into a war that used the Vietnamese to fight the Vietnamese. Bắc Bộ would become the main battlefield. In Central Việt Nam, they might divide the front into several sections and carry out sweep operations. In Nam Bộ, large-scale sweep operations would be launched.

As to the question of where the enemy would direct their principal offensive, our views were divided: Attacks might be made against the plains, Việt Bắc, or Zone 4.

Some thought that the French would attack the plains because the population there was dense, food was abundant, the plain surrounded Hà Nội, and the use of motorized forces could be maximized, all of which would create good conditions for the setting up of a puppet administration. Others believed that Việt Bắc would be attacked because the French would want to directly attack the leading organ of the resistance and the concentration of our main forces since they wanted a rapid end to the war. Still others guessed that Zone 4 would be attacked because it was our large free zone. This would enable the French to enlarge their zone of occupation and to link the North with the central part of the country. Many thought that by attacking the plains or Zone 4, the enemy would meet less resistance than if they attacked Việt Bắc where our main forces were concentrated and the terrain was mountainous and heavily forested.

By the end of our discussions, the majority thought that the French would attack the plain first. They would attack Việt Bắc if they dared to take risk. In Việt Bắc, there were only a few undestroyed towns such as Bắc Cạn. Many thought that the French would not risk parachuting troops on Bắc Cạn because the town was too far away and situated deep within our base territory among the forests and mountains.

The conference then shifted to a discussion of what measures to take to cope with the enemy's new offensive.

In view of our relative troop strength, we could not engage in a decisive battle with the enemy's main force. On the contrary, we must subvert their plan for annihilating our main force. We resolved to preserve our main force, destroy the enemy bit by bit, and defend our bases, but not at any cost, through coordinated operations between the zones and the whole country. By doing so, we would destroy their intention of setting up a puppet administration.

As to fighting tactics, the conference stressed: "To resolutely employ guerrilla warfare, to use troops at the company level for operations in each local battlefield and to concentrate our main forces for mobile warfare. Our troops must avoid adopting frontal defensive positions. They must remain to the enemy's rear, and they must concentrate or disperse rapidly. We must not let our forces be annihilated. We must always preserve them and not to attempt to keep land at any price."

The conference answered the question of what victory would consist of in the coming battle, by saying:

"If we succeed in coping with the enemy's winter offensive and in preserving the greater part of our forces, we will win the battle. The decimation and destruction of enemy forces will only increase the magnitude of our victory."

5

After the fourth military conference, I planned to visit Tuyên Quang and Chiêm Hóa before the arrival of the dry season. But during the conference, Nguyễn Khang, secretary of Zone 12, made reference to our fighting in occupied zones in the southern part of Bắc Ninh. I was concerned about this, so I decided to visit Zone 12 first.

War zone 12 was then composed of Lạng Sơn, Bắc Giang, Bắc Ninh, Hải Ninh, Hòn Gai, Quảng Yên (including Đông Triều and Chí Linh) provinces.

It was my first return to this midland region since my move to Việt Bắc.

I noticed a strange phenomenon: an independent company of the main provincial force of Bắc Ninh had always remained in the enemy-occupied region.

This unit was originally a 100-strong company of the self-guards of Ngọc Thụy (Gia Lâm) many of whom were workers at the Gia Lâm Railway Factory who had sworn to fight to the death after the night of December 19. The province provided the unit with one additional platoon of self-guards from Bắc Ninh town and about 100 guerrillas chosen from various communes. The company was organized into five platoons, including one section of Christian self-guards from Ái Mộ village and one section of women called Section Trưng Trắc.

The company coordinated its operations with a main force battalion from the Bắc Bắc regiment. When the enemy launched large-scale offensives, the battalion commander ordered the unit to withdraw. The communications person who brought the order to the company was wounded which cut off the company's links with the battalion. The company was besieged on all sides and the regiment thought it had been annihilated. Some time later, the regiment learned that the company was still fighting, ordered it to withdraw. But the whole unit, from officers to ordinary soldiers, asked to continue fighting. They convinced their superior officers that it was impossible for the French to annihilate them. The militia and the people living in surrounding districts to the south of Bắc Ninh unanimously asked the provincial authorities to let the company remain in the enemy-controlled territory, promising to take care of the men.

The company was able to survive because it was firmly supported by the people. Our fighters relied on fighting villages. They concentrated then dispersed into platoons or sections in order to fight the enemy. The French knew that parts of our forces

remained. They frantically searched for them, trying by all means to extricate them or to drive them out of the region. However, they could not. Through the determination of this company, the guerrilla movement was not only maintained but expanded. French soldiers travelling in small numbers were annihilated. The French administration in many communes was afraid of the Việt Minh. Many wicked elements were killed. Quite a few people involved in the French administration became two-faced, working for the enemy but actually obeying the directions and control of the Việt Minh. Thanks to this single company, the province's main force could easily enter and leave the occupied zone to organize ambushes and surprise attacks far behind the enemy's rear.

Even before the August 1945 general insurrection, Bắc Ninh had organized fighting villages. The Japanese and the security guards had found it very difficult to intrude into these villages. After 19 December 1946, resistance villages developed widely. Taking the lead were Đình Bảng, Tú He, and Làng Giàng villages. Each village had a battle area filled with tunnels, trenches, fortifications, mines, pikes, and booby traps. Militiamen and self-guards strictly controlled the coming and going of all strangers. Although these were isolated battlefields, our forces were often caught in the middle of big sweeps but by relying on the tunnels and trenches, even with scarce arms and ammunitions, they could hinder the advance of the enemy. The resistant village in Ái Quốc commune and Cam village, located next to the dike of the Đuống river caused great losses to the enemy, obliging them to give up their sweep operation mid-way through. Đình Bảng village north of Bắc Ninh did not let the enemy go beyond its bamboo hedge a single time in six months.

I discussed the development of more independent volunteer companies, describing the experiences of the independent company of Bắc Ninh in the areas newly occupied by the enemy. I also

described the multiplication of the resistance villages with the Zonal Committee and Command.

6

Fighting in south Bắc Ninh was like opening the page of a new book. During the anti-Japanese struggle in Cao-Bắc-Lạng, I realized that the platoon was the right size for armed agitation work and that only a company could have sufficient strength to survive and to carry out efficient military activity in an enemy-controlled area. Our fourth military conference decided to allow forces of company size to remain to the enemy's rear. This decision proved correct. To widely develop guerilla warfare, the role played by an independent company was indispensable. On my way back, I wondered what size a main-force unit should be to be most effective should the French attack Việt Bắc.

We intended to organize two main-force divisions. The zones eagerly chose their best battalions and their best weapons and proposed them to the High Command. But the war broke out and expanded very quickly. Contingents had to be sent to the South and regiments were busy with their own war zones and battlefields. The conditions were not right to concentrate our strategic reserve forces in order to repel the enemy's large-scale offensives.

In mid-August, the Government approved a decree organizing an independent division under the High Command. Hoàng Văn Thái, chief of the general staff, was expected to become division commander, with preparations made by the High Command.

While thinking about the animated atmosphere surrounding the setting up of the division, the image of the volunteer company living behind enemy lines in southern Bắc Ninh became clearer and clearer. I was on horseback, climbing a slope through a narrow pass that marked the boundary between the mid-lands and Việt Bắc. At

the top of the pass, clumps of bamboo shone brilliant green in the yellow autumnal sun. Gusts of wind brought the cold from Thái Nguyên. I felt comfortable and completely at ease. Still on horseback, an idea flashed across my mind like a bolt of lightning, clarifying my thoughts.

At that moment, I realized that to ensure the steady progress of the resistance war, we could not yet concentrate our troops into divisions and prepare for large-scale battles. On the contrary, we must undergo a long-term process of training our troops from bottom to top. Past events appeared in my mind one by one: the breaking up of the Huế battlefield, the failed regiment-scale attack on Hà Đông town, the company of volunteers in Bắc Ninh's enemy's rear, and so on. All this proved that what we needed to do now was to disperse part of our forces into companies operating guerrilla warfare deep in the enemy rear. Our main forces must be trained to fight at the battalion level before undergoing training for larger-scale battles.

From Thái Nguyên town, I decided to go on to Chợ Chu where Uncle Hồ was living, but his residence had been removed to Điềm Mạc.

After dinner, sitting by the fire in a house on stilts, I reported to him on the fourth military conference and my visit to Zone 12:

"The enemy is preparing for a large-scale offensive to wipe out our main force and achieve an early end to the war. Our troops with their present level of equipment and skills are not capable of fighting in big concentrations. I propose to Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee that we delay for some time the organization of division-sized units. We stand for resistance by all the people in all respects, but guerrilla warfare to the enemy's rear is not yet strong. I feel it is necessary to dispatch part of our main forces to localities to the enemy's rear, to disperse them into companies to develop guerrilla warfare. Our main force at the central and zonal levels should be limited to battalions; a battalion

is not too small. The French consider a battalion "a small fighting contingent". Battles of battalion scale are appropriate for mobile guerrilla warfare tactics. I propose a concrete formula: "Independent companies, concentrated battalions". Under the guiding principle put forth by Uncle Hồ, the militia should constitute a source for replenishing our main force. When the local resistance movement is strong, our main force will operate elsewhere. The stronger the local force, the more effectively it will replenish the main force. In two or three years, guerrilla warfare must develop all over the country. In that end, to win victory, we must certainly have a very strong main force."

Uncle Hồ listened attentively, then he said, "The dispersion of part of the main force to develop guerrilla warfare is very necessary. We shall not only send companies to the enemy's rear, but also to these regions where the hostilities will expand to in the future. The formula of "Independent companies, concentrated battalions" is appropriate for the current situation. The number of companies to be sent to the localities will be decided by the Standing Central Committee. Once a unanimous decision has been reached, it must be implemented at once."

The family of the host offered us a basket of cassava and some molasses.

Uncle Hồ was smoking and meditative when he continued, "The enemy has sent in a large reinforcement, the war will expand and become more atrocious, our people will suffer a lot... For the autumn and winter season this year, have the preparations been completed?"

I reported that instructions had been sent to every locality, to which the scorched earth policy would be applied, food and other materials hidden, houses and gardens emptied, and key communication lines destroyed when the enemy arrived. In the country there were now over one million militiamen and guerrillas. The army had been strengthened and replenished throughout the summer and were ready to fight.

The next morning, I went to Trường Chinh's place to relate Uncle Hồ's views. Trường Chinh agreed that from Zone 4 up north, one third of the main force would be dispersed into independent companies and sent to other places to develop guerrilla warfare; in the zones, each regiment would leave behind the regimental command and one concentrated main-force battalion; at the ministerial level, the main-force battalions would be kept unchanged and sent to fight in specific places or directions.

Trường Chinh smiled and added: "We can understand now why soldiers want to wage large-scale battles. With independent companies, the whole army will have to apply guerrilla and mobile guerrilla warfare tactics."

Trường Chinh was preparing to leave for Bắc Cạn town. No one thought that danger was awaiting him there.

Returning to my office, Department 2 had no new information regarding the enemy's offensive. Later, we learned from our base in Hà Nội that at that time French troops, including many parachutists, were concentrating in great numbers in Gia Lâm in preparation for a big battle. Because of mistakes in liaison work, this extremely important information did not reach us in time.

The General Staff had drafted an order for zones all over the country to inform them on how to cope with the French's dry-season offensive. The order affirmed that Bắc Bộ would be the main battlefield, and that the French would carry out sweeps either in the delta of Bắc Bộ or they would attack Việt Bắc. The order laid out plans for both scenarios.

But it did not fully discuss the new decisions reached by Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee on the army's new organization. I thought about drafting a supplementary order to clarify this important question. But it was 4 October 1947 already. The situation was pressing. So I corrected a few points in the order, signed it, and had it sent out.

In Việt Bắc, 1949 (From left to right: Trường Chinh, Hồ Chí Minh, Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp)

CHAPTER IV

VIỆT BẮC, AUTUMN-WINTER 1947

1

At the end of the summer, the headquarters of the High Command moved to Yên Thông, not far from Đầm Mạc, then the residence of Uncle Hồ.

We lived with the local people. There were not many fields in the region. The population was poor. The houses lay scattered on flat land. In the background were hills covered in palm trees or bamboo forests. In front were small fields. In the distance, the Hồng mountain range stretched as far as Phú Minh. To keep our positions secret, we moved our offices frequently. Sometimes I had to work in a room full of the villager's agricultural implements.

On October 6 as planned, I went to Tuyên Quang and Chiêm Hóa. In Chiêm Hóa, I had just finished evaluating the offices, supplies, and the organization of medical stations for the front with the local comrades, when a sudden message came informing me that the French had parachuted on Bắc Cạn town. Their dry season offensive had begun in a town deep in the heart of Việt Bắc! Anxiety reigned. Before borrowing some horses to return immediately to our base, I told Nguyễn Văn Huyên and Tôn Thất Tùng:[40] "According to our forefathers' experience,

40. Vietnamese intellectuals trained by the French. They joined the resistace from the beginning. Later one became minister, the other became vice minister

when the enemy come mightily like water or fire, there is nothing to fear."

Early in October, the High Command had assigned tasks to the zones in Bắc Bộ in preparation for a French offensive against Việt Bắc. The order predicted that the main offensive would be Thái Nguyên via Phúc Yên and Tuyên Quang via Vĩnh Yên, Phú Thọ. The secondary offensives would be Bắc Giang and Lạng Sơn in the east and Hòa Bình and Sơn La in the west. The main forces of the High Command and Zones 1 and 10 were given the task of fighting the main offensive. The other zones would fight the French's secondary offensives. At the same time, we would step up our activities on all battlefields, particularly on Highway 5.[41]

The units under the High Command and the zones were on their way to implement their tasks, but the enemy offensive beginning in Bắc Cạn was what we had not predicted. A number of leading governmental and support offices were concentrated in the town and the surrounding area including the Treasury Service, the bank notes printing unit, the Trần Quốc Tuấn military school, the reserve part of the station of the *Voice of Việt Nam,* and a number of factories and storage areas. I was especially worried because Trường Chinh had just arrived for a working session, and Hoàng Văn Thái was also present in the town. Moreover, the roads leading to Bắc Cạn had not yet been destroyed.

On my way back, I met the party committee and people's committee of Tuyên Quang and told them to finish destroying the town and the road without delay and to review the tactical plan for the Lô river and the roadway to Tuyên Quang. I visited Thanh La to tell Phan Mỹ and Trần Duy Hưng to discuss the mobilisation of their offices and how to move these bodies and members of the government.

41. Linking Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, over 100 kilometers

On the morning of October 8, I arrived at my command post. The office was animated, and important documents were being put into metal boxes.

The chief of the operations division reported that at 8:15 and 10 am on October 7, French parachutists landed on Bắc Cạn town with about 800 men. At 14:30 hours, about 200 French parachutists had dropped on Chợ Mới, only 20 km away from our security zone as the crow flies. The General Staff had informed all military zones and provinces and the units of our main forces of these facts and had requested that they report any new developments to the High Command at once. Trần Hiệu, who was in charge of the intelligence service, was present but could not provide any new information on the enemy. This kind of work was quite new for us. The broadcasting stations from the West which we monitored also provided no news about the French offensive.

The Standing Central Committee instructed the Bắc Cạn's provincial Party Committee to lead their armed forces in an active fight against the enemy, to defend the organs of government, to remove all stores, and to persuade the people to practice the scorched earth policy. It had cabled to all provinces to inform them of the French offensive against Việt Bắc. The zonal party committees and military committees knew that they must lead their troops in a vigorous fight against the enemy in order to divide their forces and to foil their offensive.

A fortnight earlier, on September 20, the French had launched a campaign all over the northwest. From Phong Thổ they attacked Bát Xát, from Bình Lư they occupied Sa Pa and were going on to Lào Cai. Advancing from Mường Chiên and Vạn Yên, in coordination with parachute drop in Than Uyên and Khâu Cọ, they had occupied Thượng Bằng La and were moving towards Nghĩa Lộ. Now it was clear that these activities in the northwest were intended to divert our forces: Việt Bắc was the principal objective of the French offensive.

I instructed the Staff Office to send people immediately to Bắc Cạn to find Trường Chinh and Hoàng Văn Thái. All efforts must be concentrated on watching the enemy in order to detect their intentions and plans in time. Regiment 72, then in Bắc Cạn together with a main force battalion from the High Command, was ordered to defend the government's main organs, to wage guerrilla warfare, and to fight the enemy when they tried to move along the Bắc Cạn-Chợ Mới and Bắc Cạn-Phủ Thông roads.

I approved the draft of the Army Order to annihilate the French in the defense of Việt Bắc and the High Command's appeal to the army and people to struggle to break the French winter offensive. Thereafter, I quickly left for Điềm Mạc.

Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee were very worried as there had been no news of Trường Chinh. Moreover, a number of other comrades were still caught in Bắc Cạn town.

I reported on the developments of the day and on the work that had been done by the High Command to Uncle Hồ. With the information that a large number of enemy troops had appeared at noon on Road No. 4, we guessed that the enemy would occupy Cao Bằng and then contact their parachutists in Bắc Cạn. Cao Bằng was prepared and would not fall easily like Bắc Cạn. The Việt Bắc base was threatened from the east and the west. In the west, the enemy could occupy Lào Cai and Hà Giang in order to block our northern frontier. A prong of enemy troops might follow Road No. 2 and the Lô river to reach Tuyên Quang. The military units of Zone 10 were in position and would fight them in that area.

Uncle Hồ asked, "How many troops can the enemy mobilize for the offensive?"

"According to recent information, Valluy has received a reinforcement of 20,000 men," I replied.

Uncle Hồ responded, "France does not have enough strength to wage a protracted war. She must strive for a decisive blow, creating

conditions for Bollaert to bring back Bảo Đại and seek a way to end the war. Even if Valluy can mobilize 20,000 troops for this offensive, given the rugged mountainous terrain and the forests of Việt Bắc, as well as the revolutionary spirit of the people of the various ethnic groups there, there is nothing to be feared."

On the afternoon of October 9, Hoàng Văn Thái returned from Bắc Cạn. The French had parachuted in while he was talking with the troops and the students of the military school in the town's stadium. Our available military forces consisted of one battalion of new recruits. Despite being surprised and unaccustomed in confronting parachutists, our forces fought bravely to defend the organs of the government and the people and to help them evacuate the town. On his way back, Hoàng Văn Thái visited our arms producing units, medical stations, and the reserve broadcasting station of *The Voice of Việt Nam* to direct their immediate evacuation. Only when reaching the High Command did he learn that Trường Chinh also had been in Bắc Cạn.

We shared our views on future developments. After linking Cao Bằng and Bắc Cạn, we predicted that the enemy would advance southwards into our security zone. I ordered the immediate mobilization of the High Command's forces in the midland region to the north and the graduation of the Trần Quốc Tuấn military school students; so that they could be dispatched to various units and participate in the fighting.

I said, "The enemy started their large-scale offensive by parachuting troops on Bắc Cạn in order to capture the leading organs of the resistance. They were mistaken when they believed that Bắc Cạn was our political capital. They caused us some losses but did not achieve their objective and lost the surprise factor all over the Việt Bắc battlefront. Our primary task is to defend the organs of our government at any price. We must closely follow all enemy movements and adjust our tactical plans to recover the initiative. For the time being, we must increase our fighting against

the enemy on Highways No. 4 and No. 3 and be ready to engage in battles on Highway No. 2 and on the Lô river."

That evening, the staff office was relieved to inform me that a military unit had met Trường Chinh south of Chợ Đồn. The next morning, Hoàng Văn Thái planned to go with a section of guards to meet the secretary general. I sighed my relief.

At midnight of October 9, Trường Chinh reached home. Hoàng Văn Thái went as far as Thành Cóc where he saw the secretary general resting by a stream with a unit of local troops. According to his account, when enemy planes had arrived bombing and strafing, he had been working with the provincial party committee. He took refuge on a tunnel. A moment later, enemy troops parachuted in just outside the shelter. They walked back and forth on the roof of the dugout but did not know people were hiding underneath. When it turned dark, Trường Chinh together with other comrades and people found a way to get out of Bắc Cạn. His many years' experience in underground activities had helped him escape danger.

2

On October 8, the French occupied Chợ Đồn.

On October 9, a battalion of enemy parachutists were dropped on Cao Bằng town.

On October 10, 35 French warships left Hà Nội for Sơn Tây along the Red River.

On the same day, French troops arrived in Thất Khê along Highway No. 4.

The High Command sent an urgent message to Zone 10 instructing it to actively fight the enemy on the river. It ordered Battalion 18, a battalion of the High Command's main force, to quickly move to Bình Ca to defend the western gate of Việt Bắc and

also the gate of the security zone. I sent a handwritten order to the battalion commander Vũ Phương and political commissar Hồng Cư: "Battalion 18 will live or die with the Bình Ca – Thái Nguyên road."

On October 11, the Government Council chaired by Uncle Hồ met amidst the roaring and strafing of enemy planes. I reported on the war situation. All the members of the Government expressed their determination to continue resisting and their confidence in our final victory.

On October 12, the French infantry arrived in Cao Bằng, and enemy warships and motor launchers arrived in Tuyên Quang.

Western broadcasting stations were still mum about the offensive.

During the first week, our forces tended to wage concentrated battles. They had to travel long distances to the battlefield and were not well prepared; therefore, the results of the battles were not what we hoped for. The artillery units several times missed the opportunity to destroy French boats on the Lô river. In Phan Dư, the artillery guns were positioned far from the river and the alarm was sounded late. Consequently, by the time the guns were hauled to the riverbanks, the enemy boats had passed. In Ngọc Chúc, after firing two rounds one gun's barrel broke. In Bình Ca, on October 12, our artillery sunk a LCVP (Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel boat). It was our first exploit on the Lô river. On the same day, battalion 18 succeeded in preventing French troops from landing there.

In Cao Bằng town, we had been able to remove our government's organs and supplies in time. When the enemy troops parachuted in, Regiment 74 was just being dispersed to destroy houses and no combatants were ready to fighting. Only small battles could be waged, causing minor losses to the enemy. One noteworthy achievement by Cao Bằng troops was shooting down a French plane.

Our militia attacked the parachutists and ambushed the French who tried to expand their areas of control in Thanh Mai (Bắc Cạn) and Đề Thám (Cao Bằng). Snipers caused unexpected French casualties. However, our guerrilla movement was not yet strongly developed.

Daily developments from the battlefield proved its strategic character and unprecedented scale. The French were seeking a decisive battle in the base area of Việt Bắc.

Our military forces here were reasonably large, but except for the Capital City Regiment and the Lạng Sơn Regiment which had some battle experience, all the other units had none. Our relative lack of equipment and weak organization did not allow us to engage in large battles to stop the French or to annihilate them in the town they had just occupied. Our troops' attacks against enemy garrisons, up to that moment, had not yielded many results. However, the zones and provinces reported that wherever there were army men, the population felt confident about their preparations for war. On the contrary, wherever there were only guerrilla fighters, no matter how active they might be, the population was anxious.

I had realized that the best way to oppose the French was to apply the "independent companies, concentrated battalions" formula in all zones, first and foremost in Việt Bắc. Independent companies must be sent to different locations to form a core fighting force and promote guerrilla warfare. The main force battalions would carry out mobile fighting in each locality's battlefields and along major communication lines.

I exchanged views with Hoàng Văn Thái on this question and entrusted the General Staff with the drafting of an urgent Military Order on "independent companies, concentrated battalions."

On the evening of October 13, an officer from Department 2 brought me an invaluable document: the French offensive plan and a map of Việt Bắc. It included two large-scale operations with the code names *Léa* and *Cloclo*.

The first phase of operation Léa aimed to form two prongs of French troops to completely surround the base region of Việt Bắc which comprised five provinces: Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang, and Thái Nguyên. From the east, Contingent B would advance from Lạng Sơn to Cao Bằng. Then, with the western contingent, it would complete the encirclement of our forces, and make contact with the Bắc Cạn contingent. In the west, Contingent C would go from Hà Nội to Việt Trì by the Red River then to Tuyên Quang by the Lô River. From there it would advance along the Gâm River to join Contingent B. Later we learned that the commanders of Contingent B and C were Beaufre and Commuynan respectively. These two contingents would converge in Đài Thị. In the second phase of the operation coded Cloclo, the enemy would concentrate their force and sweep the triangle formed by Bắc Cạn, Chợ Chu, and Chợ Mới and west of Highway 3.

According to the calculations made by our staff office, the western prong of the French forces was 270 km long and the eastern prong, 420 km long. The French command envisaged that the two prongs would meet each other in Đài Thị on October 13.

However, it was already October 13 and both contingents were still far away from Đài Thị.

The French had failed to implement plan Lea according to schedule which meant that plan Cloclo had to be delayed. This extra time was very valuable for us.

The French had launched operations on other battlefields in coordination with the Việt Bắc front. We did not know the total enemy force mobilized for this winter offensive, but using the plan, we could see that it was an ambitious strategic offensive which aimed at capturing the leading organs of our resistance and smashing Việt Minh main forces.

3

On the morning of October 14, Trường Chinh came to the High Command office. He was jubilant that we had gotten the French plan of operations. He shared his views with us on the enemy's intentions as reflected in the plan, on the situation of various war fronts, and our line of action in preparation for the meeting of the Standing Central Committee in the afternoon.

We decided that the enemy had mobilized the largest force possible including units of crack infantry troops, parachutists, motorized troops, artillery, engineering troops, air force, and warships. The adversary had surprised us and caused material losses for us in Bắc Cạn, Cao Bằng, Chợ Đồn, and Tuyên Quang. We had failed to correctly assess their intentions and fighting methods. The localized guerrilla warfare we were waging was not strong enough to resist. Our troops had not waged any important battles. We had not yet destroyed all communication lines and towns in the base area. In a number of places, the population was wavering.

However, numerical superiority did not mean that the enemy was strong. They had failed from the beginning in their primary objective of capturing the leading organs of our resistance. The French offensive had not started at the same time, therefore, only Bắc Cạn was surprised. In other places, we had been able to take preventive actions. French forces were also spread thin over too large an area, in heavily forested and mountainous terrain, which supplying the force difficult. They could not fully use their technical superiority. They were vulnerable in many areas. The two prongs of the offensive were too long and unable to completely encircle our base region. Their plan to complete the encirclement was significantly delayed. If we completed the destruction of roads, their movement of motorized troops would be more difficult. Thus, breaking the prongs of the offensive along the roads and the rivers was manageable. What we needed to pay attention to was plan Cloclo, since the sweeps to be conducted by the French were all located within our base region.

I proposed, "the dispersion of two thirds of the main force, sending companies to each locality, which together with the militia and guerrilla would then widely develop guerrilla warfare, encircling and decimating the enemy in places they had just arrived. We should continue to encourage the people and help them harvest all ripening rice, disperse its storage, practice the scorched earth policy, destroy important communication roads, and shape the people's war all over the country."

I also proposed, "deploying regiments and battalions in key areas, primarily along Highway No. 4, Highway No. 2 by the Lô river, and Highway No. 3, and prepare to launch surprise attacks which would gradually paralyse and break the two main prongs of the enemy."

I felt that we should also, "divide the command into two parts: the larger part would remain in the base region, going deeper in the direction of the mountains; the smaller part would move out of the threatened areas to direct the battle throughout the country and the three war fronts of Việt Bắc. I will be in charge of the smaller command and will go to the war front of Highway No. 4, Hoàng Văn Thái will go to the war front of Highway No. 3, Trần Tử Bình and Lê Thiết Hùng to the Lô river front; Văn Tiến Dũng will take charge of the larger command and remain in the base region."

Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee remained in the security zone because the local population had experience protecting revolutionary cadres since our early underground activity. First, they would be accommodated in the mountains and if necessary, moved to a safer place in the direction of Bản Cóc.

Trường Chinh agreed to the High Command's proposals. Before Hoàng Văn Thái's departure, I reminded him of the urgent need to draft an order on tactics for the autumn-winter season to Zone 1 and Zone 10 and to finalize the order on "independent companies, concentrated battalions."

Uncle Hồ attended the meeting of the Standing Central Committee on the afternoon of October 14. After listening to the report on the enemy's plans, the High Command's proposals, and the draft instructions of the Standing Central Committee presented by Trường Chinh, the conference decided that the French offensive did not show their true strength. They had become rash because they were weak. If we could exploit their weaknesses, they would have had great difficulties and their offensive would fail. The Standing Central Committee agreed to immediately apply the formula "independent companies, concentrated battalions," and to the organization of three war fronts, and to having the leading organs remain in the base region.

Trường Chinh said, "While fighting, we learn, even about what is good on the other side. This will help us correct our errors, develop our good points, capitalize on the enemy's weaknesses, hit them at their weak points, cause losses they can not bear after the offensive, and force them to shift to the defensive."

Uncle Hồ concluded the conference by saying, "The political situation in France is in utter chaos and the struggle in the colonies has caused France to try to put an early end to the Indochina war. They launched massive offensives at the beginning. If we could fight them everywhere and force them to spread their forces thin, they can be defeated. If we can preserve our main force through this winter, we will win. If they could not win a rapid victory and end the war, the situation will change to our advantage."

The next day, on October 15, reflecting the spirit of the conference, the Standing Central Committee issued the proclamation: "Smash the winter offensive of the French" to the army and people all over the country.

The High Command also issued Order ĐB/101 pointing out the new principles for the organization of the army, the disposition and tasks of the independent companies and the concentrated battalions: "In the current offensive against Việt Bắc, the enemy has taken rash

actions by parachuting troops to occupy our rear, thereby changing the situation of the war. Strategically, there has no difference between rear and front. Given the necessity of pursuing guerrilla warfare, we must adjust the development of our forces and our fighting plan to the new conditions... The company must be the unit deployed in local battlefields... The main forces should be deployed near the battlefields or key communication roads. Ideally, they should be concentrated in battalion-sized units and responsible for specific areas." The independent company had the following tasks: "to harass and annihilate small parts of the enemy forces, to carry out local sabotages, to help with armed propagation work, and to coordinate the mobile forces and wage large battles." The concentrated battalion had the following tasks: "to coordinate with the independent companies and local guerrillas in order to annihilate the enemy located in isolated posts or when they are moving along communication roads."

On the same day of October 15, President Hồ Chí Minh appealed to the army and the people of Việt Bắc to do their utmost to break the enemy's operations. He appealed to the army and people of the whole country to actively fight the enemy and to coordinate with Việt Bắc. He wrote, "The enemy has assembled their troops in Bắc Cạn, creating an umbrella covering Việt Bắc. When they close the umbrella, from below they will attack up, from high up they will attack down to destroy the leading organs of the resistance. They are strong because of these two prongs, if the prongs are broken, then the closed umbrella will become a torn one and the offensive will fail."

On October 16, I signed the orders to Zone 1, pointing out that all the regiments of the zone would retain only the regiment command and a concentrated battalion. The other battalions would be dissolved into companies. These companies would be sent to the districts mentioned in the order. At the end, the order stated, "the order should be fulfilled by 16 November 1947 and the results should be reported to the High Command." The General Staff sent officers to help the independent companies in a number of the major

districts in Bắc Cạn, Lạng Sơn, and Tuyên Quang. Only a short time later, two thirds of the forces of the regiments had been dispatched to the districts to serve as local forces.

On October 13, the enemy's broadcasting station began to report that French troops had occupied Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn, and a series of other positions in Việt Bắc. French officials in Saigon explained that the ongoing operations were aimed at creating positive conditions for the negotiations with Bảo Đại. Much was made of these victories in the French-controlled mass media.

The French colonialists pinned their hopes on their offensive against the Việt Bắc base region, which they claimed was developing successfully. Later when we read the 17 October report from Salan to the High Command of the French Expeditionary Corps, he stressed, "The main supply line linking Việt Minh to China via Cao Bằng has been cut off; the national base of Việt Minh has been seriously damaged in the northeast (Bắc Cạn, Chợ Mới, Chợ Đồn)... French troops are sweeping hard and driving the base towards disintegration... No doubt our strong and direct attacks have dealt a hard blow to the potential and morale of the opponent."

4

On October 17, part of the command and I left Yên Thông after cabling Regiment 74 in Cao Bằng and Regiment 11 in Lạng Sơn to order them to lay ambushes on Highway 4. At the same time, Zone 10 was instructed to immediately move the artillery guns upstream along the Lô river to a point where the covered terrain was appropriate for laying ambushes against French ships. Hoàng Văn Thái, Trần Tử Bình, and Lê Thiết Hùng[42] also left for the war front on Highway 3 and the Lô river.

42. Generals of the People's Army of Việt Nam

We went down to Bờ Đậu, stopping over at the Trung Lương commune before arriving at Đồn Đu. The communication section laid telephone wire and had a transmitter to maintain smooth liaison with the war fronts.

The villages looked deserted. The local population had practiced the scorched earth policy and evacuated to the jungle, taking with them grain, cattle, and other domestic animals. Not a cock crowed, not a dog barked. Slogans everywhere said "Smash the French winter offensive." Only guerrillas and militiamen stayed behind to guard the villages. I remembered the French sweeps and searches before the August Revolution. They were now several times stronger. It was reported that the French army had units specially trained in jungle fighting. Wherever we went, we received reports on the adversary's situation from the resistance committee and had a guide for the next leg of our journey. The guide from Phú Lương district led us in the direction of La Hiên.

On October 20, we arrived at Vũ Nhai district. In the afternoon, we passed through the fields of Tràng Xá[43] and entered a small village of Dao people which had chosen to be the headquarters of the light command. In front of the house we were to use was a grass expanse leading to the forest with a limpid stream and mountains all around.

Our host family did not know who we were. No cadres had come to the house for a long time. The host proposed a ceremony to mark the sworn brotherhood between us. It reminded me of the days before the general insurrection when the local population and I had drunk alcohol mixed with chicken blood to swear absolute devotion and sacrifice for the revolution.

Two weeks after enemy troops parachuted on Bắc Cạn, our fighting had significantly increased.

43. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

On October 15, two main-force battalions of the High Command, supported by an artillery gun, attacked 200 French troops garrisoned in Chợ Mới. On October 21, along the war front of Highway 3, a battalion from the Capital City Regiment attacked a French company garrisoned in Chợ Đồn. In both places, we caused enemy losses but could not annihilate them. These two battles and seventeen small ambushes on the Phủ Thông – Bắc Cạn and Chợ Mới – Bắc Cạn roads made the French realize that they were now strongly opposed. They no longer dared venture out of the town and their camps. Supplies were brought in by air and parachuted to Bắc Cạn.

In the west, a main-force battalion of the Hà Tuyên regiment, under the command of Lê Thùy, actively stuck to Commuynan's prong and continuously launched surprise attacks, obliging the French to advance with caution. The French only reached Đầm Hồng on the 20th and halted there to wait for more troops. On the 22nd, the militia of Tuyên Quang town used homemade mines to attack the French on Km 7 of Highway 2, killing and wounding nearly 100 of their troops. One French battalion, which was advancing to Chiêm Hóa, was forced to return.

The French operation had been slowed significantly and was off schedule.

Everyday, I reported on battle developments to Uncle Hồ and Trường Chinh. Given the surprise parachuting of enemy troops, Uncle Hồ had moved from Điềm Mạc to Khuổi Tác.[44]

On the 22nd, it was reported that Beaufre's troops had reached Đài Thị and that Commuynan's troops were going to arrive there. The Lea phase of the French campaign was ending and the Cloclo phase could start with a siege and pressure on the quadrilateral covering Tuyên Quang – Đài Thị – Bắc Cạn – Thái Nguyên, the

44. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

centre of which was Chợ Chu. I wrote an urgent letter proposing that Uncle Hồ and Trường Chinh move in accordance with the plan discussed by the Standing Central Committee. At that moment, Uncle Hồ felt unwell, and Trường Chinh hesitated. However, Uncle Hồ said the plan must be followed. The way to Bản Cóc was thick with vegetation. Uncle Hồ left his horse and cleared his own way through the grass. Bản Cóc was a long-standing revolutionary base in the highlands with many comrades of exemplary loyalty and faithfulness among the Dao ethnic group. I was relieved at the news that Uncle Hồ had arrived at that destination.

I decided to go quickly to the warfront on Highway 4.

5

At each stopover on the way, the operation officer got in contact with the various battlefields to be informed of their situation.

On the afternoon of the 25th, when we were at rest in Bắc Sơn,[45] the operation officer came running in to tell us that there had been a great victory in the warfront along the Lô river.

Ever since the French had attacked Tuyên Quang, I had been waiting for news of victory from the direction of the Lô river. The terrain was rugged, and therefore ideal for artillery ambushes and surprise attacks. We had previously prepared plans, but so far no big losses had been inflicted on the enemy. We were told that enemy warships were moving and difficult to hit. Moreover, we were using mended and technically unsafe guns. In Bình Ca, after firing one round, one gun collapsed. Its wheels had been made by the artillerymen themselves and could not withstand the force of the recoil. Another gun had been assembled from pieces

45. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

collected in six different provinces. It was named "the gun of six provinces." Still another had a barrel made from portions of two barrels joined together. It was called "the gun with a joined barrel."

The operation officer reported that, at noon that day, our artillery had sunk two enemy warships in Đoan Hùng[46] and crippled two others.

"Repeat!" I demanded.

"At noon, a train of five warships were sailing downstream from Tuyên Quang and fell into an ambush laid by the Xuân Canh platoon (the former platoon of the Xuân Canh fortress in the suburbs of Hà Nội) and the six-province platoon. They sunk two enemy ships on the spot and the crew was drowned. They also heavily damaged two others. Only one boat was able to return to Tuyên Quang. According to the report, hundreds of French troops were killed."

"How had our troops fought? Why previously, had we not been able to hit home? Even when we did, why hadn't the boats sank?"

"Previously our men were afraid that the enemy would rush to the river banks and take their guns. So they positioned the guns in the distance and fired in a parabola arc. The shells only fell near the target. This time, they positioned the guns by the riverbanks using the infantry's defence. Aiming at the boats through the barrels, they were able to hit them directly."

After this exploit, the Lô river was cut off to the enemy for ten days. Supplies were parachuted to Tuyên Quang and Chiêm Hóa. French press and radio referred to the defeat as "the disaster of Đoan Hùng." The Đoan Hùng victory opened the way for the brilliant exploits of our main forces in the campaign of Việt Bắc.

On the evening of the 25th, we arrived in the quarters of Lạng Sơn province in Bình Gia. Hoàng Văn Kiều, the party secretary of

46. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

the province, and Trần Minh Tước, chairman of the province, organized a working session with the commanders of Regiment 11 at once.

Highway 4 from Lạng Sơn to Cao Bằng ran through high mountains and forests, making it ideal for ambushes. Our forces, including Regiment 74 of Cao Bằng and Regiment 11 of Lạng Sơn, were deployed along the route.

Implementing Order 101, the regiments had dispersed into battalions to fight in their respective areas and a number of independent companies had been sent to key localities to develop guerrilla warfare. Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng were both long standing base areas of the revolution. The local people were politically aware, and the guerrilla movement developed quickly. We had barely arrived in Lạng Sơn when news came that the workers of the Lê Tổ arms-producing mill in Cao Bằng and the militia of Hào Lịch, Hưng Đạo, and Hùng Việt communes had repelled a French offensive, killing nearly 100. In contrast, the main forces had not yet waged a significant ambush.

Regiment 11, which was trying to plan ambushes, reported that the French were taking every precaution in their movements. Their convoys were always escorted by tanks or armoured vehicles.

I stressed the importance of Highway 4 to the French now that we occupied Cao Bằng and Bắc Cạn. We were determined to turn it into a death route for them, not only for the immediate period but for the entire time they occupied the Northeast. The terrain along Highway 4 from Thất Khê to Cao Bằng was well suited for battalion-sized ambushes. We could cause the enemy great losses, keep the initiative in fighting and still be able to withdraw, preserve our forces, and acquire more equipment with the French weapons we seized. What was important now was knowing more about enemy movements, and initiating some battles in order to learn from experience.

On October 27, I sent orders to all three war fronts.

"Highway 4: to resolutely organize a number of ambushes to annihilate the enemy.

"Highway 3: to encircle and cut off French supply lines, and compel them to withdraw from the area of Chợ Đồn and Chợ Rã.

"The Lô river: to bring in guns and fight the enemy on the Gâm River to force them to pull out of Chiêm Hóa and Đầm Hồng."

Four days later, on October 31, I had just gotten up when a telephone call came from comrade Thế Hùng, the political commissar of Regiment 11, informing me of a great victory on Highway 4 in Bông Lau. He was in charge of battalion fighting on the Đông Khê - Thất Khê road. At 17:00 hours of the preceding day, Battalion 374 had ambushed a convoy of thirty French vehicles on Bông Lau Pass. We destroyed 27 vehicles, killed 101 soldiers and captured 104 others, and seized all their armaments, including 600 parachutes and much other war material.

This was the second major piece of good news in one week. It affirmed the wisdom of opening three war fronts targeting important enemy transportation lines. The victories on the Lô River and at Bông Lau had created excellent prospects for our main forces.

Battalion 374 was composed of units that previously had been dispersed to build bases in the villages of Lạng Sơn province. They had just joined together, and all their combatants were Tày and Nùng people. The battalion's equipment was modest and it had no experience waging concentrated battles. I dispatched an envoy, Đặng Văn Việt, to the Battalion with a letter of commendation from the High Command. He was also charged with drawing conclusions about the battle and the reasons for its success.

The ambush had been perfectly arranged. The combatants, all local people, knew the terrain and the weather well, and had studied the French convoys. The battle broke out at 17:00 hours, an hour when it was already fairly dark in winter. The convoy of thirty

vehicles came down from Đông Khê through the dangerous Đông Khê Pass. They were traveling confidently downhill to Thất Khê where the troops could rest. At that moment, a 25-kg bomb exploded in the middle of the bend, overturning the second vehicle. The first vehicle took flight. The third vehicle was hit by a bazooka shell and caught fire. The convoy had been attacked by surprise and great confusion and congestion was created. The section of our engineers continued to explode mines. French vehicles were thrown into the abyss or blown across the road, striking the mountain. Machine guns of various calibers and bazookas rained bullets on the convoy. After ten minutes of firing, three companies of shock troops emerged from the edge of the Khau Phia forest and assaulted the enemy. Most were Europeans and Africans, and they responded weakly. The Vietnamese partisans withdrew into the forest. The convoy was supported by armored vehicles with about 250 troops who were all killed or captured. Our soldiers collected what they could and burned the vehicles. On our side, only one soldier was killed and five others were wounded. The quantity of captured weapons and ammunition was considerable.

Like the Lô river, Highway 4 was cut off for many days. The enemy had to parachute supplies to Bắc Cạn and Cao Bằng and set up a number of small military posts along the road. They mobilized seven companies for sweep operations 11-12 km to the southwest, deep into Đông Khê-Thất Khê. Battalion 374, after the successful operation at Bông Lau, had the opportunity to intercept the enemy at Áng Mò, Văn Mịch. Together with an independent company and the militia, they killed about eighty French soldiers and drove back the enemy's sweep operation.

News of the Bông Lau battle quickly spread to all the units. This had been an annihilation, a whole enemy unit had been neatly wiped out and most of them had been troops from the French foreign legion. Moreover, our casualties had been slight. The Bông Lau victory opened the way for a series of big

ambushes later. The High Command decided to award the title of "Bông Lau Battalion" to Battalion 374, and the song *Bông Lau* was composed, including the words "Bông Lau, Bông Lau, deep forest red with enemy blood".

After that, Highway 4 was known as the road of blood for the French.

6

After the battle of Bông Lau, the Command and I left Bình Gia for Tràng Xá. Comrade Đào Văn Trường remained on the Highway 4 war front to supervise the fighting. I sent a message to Hoàng Văn Thái telling him to transfer the command of the Highway 3 war front to the Bắc Cạn Regiment and to return to headquarters.

After a few days, the upset caused by the French's surprise attack had been overcome. Our military forces had been deployed and all war fronts were fighting. It was time for the High Command to develop a plan for the whole army, both for the short term and long range, while continuing to direct the offensive in Việt Bắc.

News of victory continued to come from various war fronts. On November 10, the artillery of Zone 10 scored a big success on the Gâm River, sinking four of five enemy boats on their way from Chiêm Hóa to Tuyên Quang. Two hundred French soldiers were killed. This battle reflected the tactical improvement our artillery had made — organizing false maneuvers and coordinating their efforts with the infantry and the militia. They could destroy enemy boats and capture equipment. In this battle, for the first time we seized two 105-mm guns.

On November 19, the security forces and the self-guards of Tuyên Quang town laid a minefield and killed about 100 French troops at Km 6 on the Hà Tuyên road.

Because of the continuous battles being waged on the Gâm River and on Highway 2, French news agencies referred to Tuyên Quang

as a giant graveyard. Major Lejosne reported on November 13, 1947: "Because of the bitter defeat of the navy, the troops are discouraged. The officers endeavor to keep up their men's morale, but they feel they should no longer send them to the front. If they did, their morale would be quickly depressed... The best non-commissioned officers and groups leaders have been wounded."

From the beginning of November, the French were obliged to set up many small posts to defend supply roads N° 4 and N° 3. Before a convoy passed, the French searched on both sides of the road. They could not, however, avoid surprise ambushes here and there.

On October 23, Beaufré's contingent had arrived in Đài Thị. On October 26, Commuynan's contingent also had arrived, but Beaufré by then had pulled his troops back to Chợ Đồn, so the meeting of the two contingents in Đài Thị did not take place. Late in October, the two contingents began to shrink back. In the west, Commuynan withdrew from Đầm Hồng and Chiêm Hóa. In the east, Beaufré withdrew from Bản Thi, Chợ Đồn and Chợ Rã.

The people of Việt Bắc and the army fought on many warfronts all over the country.

In Zone 14, troops in the west liberated Chiềng Sai. The people were mobilized in Sơn La with good results. Many Thai soldiers at the same time were deserting the French.

In Hà Nội, our commandos were very active in the city, killing Trương Đình Tri, the French-appointed governor of North Việt Nam. Our guerillas harassed continuously Chèm, Cầu Giấy, Văn Điển, and Vĩnh Tuy.[47] Independent companies, in coordination with the guerillas, attacked Đan Phượng, Hoài Đức, and Cần Kiệm.[48] They destroyed French puppet administrations in the

47. Places in Hà Nội
48. Places in Hà Tây province

suburbs of Hà Nội and arrested 300 traitors. In the southern part of Bắc Ninh, all the puppet administrations were overthrown. The population rose up with the same dedication and enthusiasm as during the general insurrection.

Zones 5 and 6 fought energetically. The attacks in Ninh Hòa, Trại Dầu, and Cam Ranh caused big losses to the enemy. On Road 19, Ngô Mây exploded a bomb which neatly killed a French platoon but also resulted in the loss of his own life.

Nam Bộ coordinated efforts with Việt Bắc which proved most effective. Gia Định troops laid ambushes in Gò Nổi. On the night of 14 November 1947 all enemy positions on the outskirts of Saigon were attacked, including Thị Nghè, Gia Định, Gò Vấp, Bến Cát, Bà Quẹo, Bà Điểm, Phú Lộc, Phủ Thọ and Ngã Năm. Our fighters threw hand grenades into French camps and recreational places reserved for their soldiers. Thủ Dầu Một troops laid an ambush in Phú Văn Hưng. An ambush on the Thủ Dầu Một — Phú Riềng Road destroyed ten vehicles, killing sixty enemy soldiers and capturing a number of prisoners.

In Biên Hòa, Lộc Ninh, Tây Ninh, Tân An, Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long, and Cần Thơ, many enemy positions were attacked. Soldiers traveling together in small numbers were annihilated. Hundreds of Vietnamese troops working for the French sided with the resistance, bringing their rifles with them.

After one month of fighting the French's strategic offensive, despite our successes, a number of shortcomings had become apparent.

Our army had grown quickly and its fighting spirit was high, but it had not yet received basic training and its tactical and technical level was still too low to meet our needs.

Ours was a resistance war fought by the whole people, with guerilla tactics as its core, but to this point guerilla warfare was not widely developed and its effectiveness was still limited.

On November 10, the High Command issued the order "Training the Combatants and Achieving Exploits" which was

aimed at training the troops and raising their tactical and technical level.

Four days later, it issued a second order, "To Develop Guerilla Warfare: the Fundamental Military Task in the Present Period," which reaffirmed the role of guerilla warfare in the resistance.

The Cloclo Plan did not evolve as the French had hoped.

On November 17, I returned to Lục Giã.[49]

7

Commuynan's troops gathered in Tuyên Quang town, while the greater part of Beaufré's troops concentrated in Bắc Cạn town. These two prongs were still located on the sides of our base region. We had reason to believe that the French would withdraw. Their supply routes to these troops, by road and by river, were seriously threatened, and the French air force was unable to ensure supply by air. When would they withdraw? And by which route? And we could not rule out their original plan to capture our base region! It was an important objective of the French offensive that had not yet achieved.

On November 18 the High Command received a cable from Zone 10, saying that: "The enemy is seriously wavering. We propose concentrating ground forces and artillery in order to annihilate them in Tuyên Quang."

I knew French morale had weakened as a result of their continuous defeats, but they were still numerically superior and their armament was strong. Our forces, with their present level of equipment and expertise, were unable to wage a big attack against Tuyên Quang town. The High Command ordered Zone 10 to closely monitor all French activities and be ready to fight them during their withdrawal.

49. A place in Việt Bắc war zone

On the morning of the 21st, the High Command received the report that the French had secretly pulled out of Tuyên Quang town at 2.00 a.m. They were divided into two parts. The smaller part was following the Lô River, while the greater part was advancing to the east of Bình Ca. They had abandoned all their equipment but had not dared to set fire to them. While we had missed the opportunity to fight the French as they left, our troops now entered the town.

We believed that the enemy's withdrawal had begun, and believed that they might carry out sweeps aimed at our command and communications organs.

I instructed the General Staff to send messages to the units ordering them to fight the enemy as they withdrew and to defend all official organs.

On the 22nd, the greater part of the Beaufré's contingent moved from Bắc Cạn to Chợ Mới. Since the roads there had been destroyed, they left their vehicles and walked to Thái Nguyên. At the same time a battalion traveling through the forests advanced towards Chợ Chu via Quán Vuông. Commuynan's contingent withdrew to Sơn Dương, then divided into two sections. One group followed the Kháng Nhật Pass to Vĩnh Yên; the other group crossed the Đèo Khế Pass to Phú Minh.[50]

By the 25th, Beaufré's troops in Chợ Chu and Commuynan's troops in Phú Minh were approaching our security zone from two directions. We had deployed strong units of our main forces under the command of Phạm Ngọc Mậu, Thái Dũng, and Vũ Lăng[51] to destroy the enemy should they thrust into the security region.

Trường Chinh phoned to ask the General Staff, "Will the enemy be able to enter the security region?"

50. Places in Việt Bắc war zone
51. Generals of the People's Army of Việt Nam

Hoàng Văn Thái answered, "So far the enemy has not searched too deeply on either side of the road. Our troops will not let them intrude into the security region."

On the 26th, the French dropped a battalion of parachutists on La Hiên and Tràng Xá, Võ Nhai district, from which the last part of command had just pulled out. The French searched the surrounding area but all the villages were deserted.

We got further information that besides the French contingent which had advanced from Phả Lại to Phủ Lạng Thương and Nhã Nam, another contingent was advancing from Hà Nội to Vĩnh Yên. It was obvious that this contingent intended to meet and support the French troops then withdrawing from Việt Bắc.

Along Highways 3 and 13 and the Phú Minh - Chợ Chu Road, Beaufré's troops and the parachutists foraged on both sides of the roads but did not go deeper into the surrounding territory. Many of our command and communications staff were only 1-2 km away from the enemy. Once when I was working at Lục Giã, I received news that the enemy was approaching. All the officers and men instantly took up arms and went to the edge of the forest joining the main force, ready to fight should the enemy came. But this time they did not come.

The French perfunctorily passed by these places. When it got dark, they halted and mounted guard carefully. At night, they lit lamps and fires at one place and hid their troops in another. Sometimes French soldiers wore conical palm-leaf hats and local people's clothes to disguise themselves.

Our main force battalions closely followed the two withdrawing contingents and the reinforcement parachutists. They fought them at Quán Ông Già, Mỹ Trạng, Huy Ngạc Bridge, Phú Ninh, Quảng Nạp, Lục Giã, La Hiên, Quân Quang, Trại Cà, La Khê, Dào Vuông, Nà Nội as well as other places. Part of Regiment 174 laid an ambush on the Khế Pass which prevented Commuynan's and Beaufré's contingents from joining each other.

Along the battle front of the Lô River, a number of ambushes were laid on the roads and water ways in Bình Ca, at Km 5, and at Lã Hoàng. Several enemy ships were sunk and part of the withdrawing troops were killed.

On Highways 3 and 4, many coordinated operations were carried out. Our forces killed a platoon of French troops in Phủ Thông and laid ambushes in Đèo Giàng, destroying seventeen armored vehicles and annihilating two more French platoons. One battalion of the Cao Bằng regiment laid an ambush on the Đông Khê - Cao Bằng Road, causing heavy losses to a mixed French company of Europeans and Africans.

The independent companies, in coordination with the militia and the guerillas, fought the enemy on all battlefields. The self-defenders of Thái Nguyên town applied guerilla warfare tactics to kill hundreds of enemy troops. The guerillas of Phú Xuân waged twenty small battles, stopping French search operations in the villages. For this successful exploit, they were awarded medals. The guerillas of Đại Từ laid ambushes in Khương Linh, Cù Vân, Đình Đôi, and Cầu Giốc.

On the front in the midland region, the guerillas and independent companies fought the French in Đông Anh, Thiện Kế, Phù Lỗ, An Đạo, Chợ Vàng, and Yên Thế. The concentrated battalion of Việt Yên set an ambush in Tam Lộng, destroying two platoons of French troops. The company of local troops of Đáp Cầu killed thirty enemy soldiers on their way to Bắc Giang. An old militiaman killed six French troops in a battle using a crossbow.

One after another, towns such as Tuyên Quang, Thái Nguyên, Bắc Giang, Đáp Cầu, Việt Trì, Vĩnh Yên and Phúc Yên returned to the control of the Việt Minh.

On 19 December 1947, exactly one year after the outbreak of a nationwide resistance war, the French strategic offensive against our base region of Việt Bắc came to an end. French forces remained

only in Bắc Cạn and Cao Bằng towns and in positions aimed at safeguarding Highway 4, from Lạng Sơn to Cao Bằng, and Highway 3, from Cao Bằng to Bắc Cạn.

Thousands of French troops had been killed or wounded on the communication lines of Việt Bắc; 270 puppet troops had abandoned the enemy to return to our ranks. We had also shot down 18 planes, sunk 16 warships and 38 motor launches, and destroyed 255 vehicles of various kinds.

Our casualties included 260 killed and 168 wounded. We had one 75-mm gun destroyed and lost four machine guns and 40 rifles, but we had captured two 105-mm guns, three 75-mm guns, 16 20-mm heavy machine guns, 42 mortars, 377 machine guns of various calibers, 45 bazookas, 1,660 rifles, and many tons of war materiel.

In 1971, General Salan wrote at length in his memoirs about the offensive against Việt Bắc. He realized that it had been an ambitious scheme, but with the information available to him and with two contingents of the expeditionary corps composed of war-experienced soldiers, he had been confident that victory could be won.

Salan considered Operation Lea, on 7 October 1947, to be the decisive blow "directly struck at the heart of the enemy." He personally watched the dropping of parachutists over Bắc Cạn from a plane. At 11.35 hours, Sovagnac had reported by radio: "Mr. Hồ Chí Minh has been captured and has requested an end to the war." Salan hastily flew back to Hà Nội to send the good news to Saigon. High Commissioner Bollaert and Acting Commander-in-chief Battet quickly flew to Hà Nội. By then Salan knew that he was mistaken and had to admit: "We have been tricked." According to Salan, his two superiors immediately returned to Saigon after giving him a speech which was "far from being laudatory!"

The French held an inquiry which is still inconclusive. We know that on that day, French parachutists had captured a dignified old man who demanded the end of the war of aggression in French. When learned that he was not President Hồ Chí Minh, they shot him dead as he tried to run away. He was Nguyễn Văn Tố, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, an ardent patriotic intellectual and a warm-hearted and admired person. His sacrifice was a great loss for us.

During the last days of October, Salan and Bollaert several times inspected the battle field by air. They concluded that:

"The French troops have occupied a number of towns and villages. However, their forces have been spread thin in isolated positions, far from one another, and have been continually encircled, harassed, and attacked by our troops.

"Although they have searched some Việt Minh supply areas in Bắc Cạn and Chợ Đồn, the principal objective of the campaign is still far from being achieved.

"French human and material losses have been too great, particularly on the road and rivers, so that reinforcements and supplies have been mainly carried out by air, which is both expensive and difficult due to lack of planes."

Salan did not refer to the Cloclo Plan that we had seized. He spoke, however, of a new plan called Ceinture (meaning "tighten the belt") which took place from November 19 to November 30, 1947 and concentrated French forces in the quadrilateral Tuyên Quang - Thái Nguyên - Phủ Lạng Thương - Việt Trì with the aim of annihilating the Việt Minh forces. But the plan did not achieve its objective.

8

After the withdrawal of the French from Việt Bắc, I went to Uncle Hồ and Trường Chinh to report.

Uncle Hồ had moved from Bản Cóc to Khuổi Tát.[52] He had recovered from an illness but still looked pale and anemic. He showed me an article he had written summing up the first year of the resistance war.

"From the first day, the colonialists and militarists boasted that if quickly, it would take about five weeks. If slowly, it would take three months, and they would force us to submit. Now how many times five weeks? How many times three months? What results do they have? They have lost 30,000 French troops and 30,000 wounded; they have spent over three billion piastres; they have occupied a number of towns that have been reduced to ruins... In spite of difficulties and suffering, our people have become more united, more enthusiastic, more determined to struggle until final victory. Our combatants have accumulated more and more experience, are better and better trained, and have become more and more courageous... The enemy forces are like the sunset, arrogant but fading. Our forces become stronger and stronger, like water at its source, like a fire kindled, always going forward and not drawing back..."

The next morning, I left Uncle Hồ for Tuyên Quang to attend the victory celebration.

The past two months had been tense and busy days. We had to shoulder a mountain of work to ensure the safety of the central organs of our government, to fight the enemy, to protect our factories, storages, to defend the lives of the people and to ensure their livelihood. Everyone had gotten thinner, had not eaten enough, had spent sleepless nights, and had being constantly on the move. Many suffered from fungous diseases from too many rainy days and constantly damp clothes, their feet became ulcerous and painful.

52. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

People from throughout the region came to the victory celebration. They included Party officials from Zone 10, the zonal command, the Provincial Party Committee, the provincial people's committee and the military command of Tuyên Quang province as well as the infantry, artillery and militia fighters who had won victory over the enemy on the Lô River, the Gâm River, and Km 7 of the Hà Tuyên road.

Thousands of torches brilliantly lit the place, warming the cold mist and winter wind. They brightened the faces of the combatants carrying their newly-seized automatic weapons and proudly parading them before the rostrum.

I read out the order of the day from the High Command commemorating the anniversary of one year of national resistance, three years since the founding of the liberation army, and our victory over the recent Autumn-Winter offensive against Việt Bắc. I also conveyed the congratulations of Uncle Hồ and the government to the participants.

Afterwards, on behalf of the High Command, I pinned medals on the flags of the military units which had achieved successful exploits against the French.

To commemorate the glory of the Việt Bắc victory, new names appeared: the Regiment of the Lô River, the battalion of Bông Lau, the battalion of Bình Ca, and Artillery Battalion 410.

9

From the present perspective, Việt Bắc was the French's most ambitious strategic offensive during its war of aggression against Indochina. It happened at a moment when our armed forces were still embryonic.

Its author was Valluy who had been the Chief of Staff of De Lattre's first army during the Second World War. He was chosen by

Leclerc to be his successor in Indochina. I met Valluy several times in Hà Nội. Both Leclerc and Valluy had the manners of the French military. The character and the appearance of the two men, however, were quite different. Leclerc was tall and thin. His eyes were intelligent, he had a pleasant face and he spoke straightforwardly. Valluy was solidly built, courteous, and deep.

Valluy remarked, "Việt Nam was no longer comprised of separate communities as it had been and could not be conquered by the traditional strategy of pacifying one region after another. Vietnamese society was now a pyramidal structure united by an ideology, and closely led from above. To reconquer Việt Nam, we must first "smash its head" — the Việt Minh. In other words, separate the summit from the base of the pyramid. To that end, we must destroy the Việt Minh in the highlands of Bắc Bộ, by capturing their leading offices, eliminating their permanent army, and destroying their war potential." General Salan, who had proved his talents during the liberation of France as commander of the 9th Division was entrusted with this task. He had lived in Indochina for thirteen years and also had considerable experience in the highlands of Bắc Bộ. Given the abundant military forces under his command before he started his campaign against the Việt Minh, Salan was confident he would achieve his objectives within three weeks.

Salan was too subjective with his experience when he was still a military post commander in the highlands in the colonial time, when a French officer and several dozen Vietnamese partisans could control a large area. This time, however, French troops were no longer welcomed by commune and village chiefs. Instead, they found deserted hamlets with no food or domestic animals. They admitted, "The people avoid us like the bubonic plague."

French officers and the men on the battlefield realized much sooner than their High Command the difficulties, dangers, and defeats they would suffer. Their letters and diaries, blurred with

blood and river water, which we captured during the campaign reflected their fright. "We are encircled on all sides," wrote Sergeant Gaston Varenne. "As soon as we go one step out of our camp, we are at once shot at by snipers from the mountain." "The Việt Minh are unimaginably numerous, we have been ambushed several times and suffered great losses... Our sweep operations are fruitless. As soon as we leave the place, the enemy returns without delay," recorded Captain Thibaut. "This war by small groups of fighters in a mountain region, is causing us heavy losses," wrote Captain Bourdeaux. In a letter to his wife dated 15 November 1947, a soldier named Pernos wrote: "If we have a boy, we should definitely not let him go to this terrible country." Lieutenant Logier wrote in his diary: "We wonder whether our sacrifice and efforts are useless."

The great failure of the French was not in the number of their soldiers who were killed or in the amount of war materials seized or destroyed. It was due to the fact that the region being defended at any cost by the Việt Minh could not be destroyed. This fact also was the reason their offensive failed to achieve its principal objectives.

Salan could not capture the leadership of the resistance war. The bold Operation Lea actually surprised us, but Valluy had been greatly mistaken in believing the little town of Bắc Cạn had become the new capital of the resistance. Throughout the anti-French war, no central organ of our command leadership was based in a town. It had been divided into small parts which were always on the move and mixed in with and protected by the people in isolated villages. They were difficult for the enemy to detect and could continue leading the resistance war.

The French could not subdue our main forces. On the contrary, throughout the offensive, our troops were being trained in fighting and becoming more mature and better equipped and armed.

The enemy had destroyed a number of storage depots and seized ten million *đồng* from the Department of Treasury, but it was still very far from its objective of "undermining all war potentials." Our

equipment and supplies were dispersed, and our war potential originated with the people.

The French could not seal off the northern border. The towns and villages they occupied and the line of military posts they erected along the border were but isolated positions within an immense zone controlled by our people. They merely became targets for future annihilation by our forces.

Although we suffered a surprise attack and faced many difficulties during the first days, we soon recovered the initiative as we fought back. We defeated the French's ambitious offensive by following the strategic and tactical principles we had formulated during the summer. By doing so we were able to fight an enemy several times stronger than ourselves.

We utilized a Front Line Command to direct and coordinate the various battlefields and combined forces of the regular army, the people, the local forces, and the militia.

The big military successes we achieved during the first days of the resistance can be attributed to the fact that we forced the French to fight earlier than they intended. Later, however, we won victories because we took the initiative and refused to fight the big battles the French did their utmost to draw us into in order to smash our main forces. The lesson drawn from revolutionary wars is that when your force is still weak, postpone decisive battles. Instead, we used middle and small-sized units to attack the French and annihilate their forces at strategic places.

From the very beginning of the resistance war, our troops were ordered to avoid large, front-line battles. They were told to destroy the enemy using ambushes and surprise attacks along transport roads and at their newly-established garrisons. Relatively small forces carried out these operations in coordination with the on-going activities of the militia and the guerillas which included harassment, sniper fire and sabotage, in addition to practicing the

scorched-earth policy. Our timely decision to disperse our troops in concentrated battalions operating in specific regions and in independent localized companies promoted a people's war which made it easier to implement this tactical method.

The enemy's hammer struck thin air.

The French Command made a fundamental mistake when it attempted to encircle too large an area — the five provinces of Việt Bắc — with 12,000 troops forming two enormous prongs. In a battlefield of forests and mountains, this "boa" tactic quickly revealed its weakness and the operation was doomed to failure even with a larger number of troops. We capitalized on the weakest points of their offensive which were the convoys and the war boats which of necessity had to move along fixed roads and rivers to supply food and ammunition to such a large number of troops. Our small units which carried a limited amount of equipment could mete out effective blows to the enemy. For the first time, French warships and landing craft, believed invulnerable, were sunk by our courageous and creative artillerymen.

The weather, the climate, and the mosquitoes of Việt Bắc's forests were like quick-acting acid, eroding the strength of the expeditionary corps on their long operations. The Beaufré and Commuynan contingents had not yet contacted each other when they began losing their will to fight. The French forces were never able to engage in a decisive battle with our main force. Instead, they were compelled to divide into small units occupying a number of towns, villages, and military posts scattered along communication roads in order to cope with ambushes which could occur at any time and in an increasing scale. Finally, the only thing the French could do was withdraw.

Working together the army, the Kinh people, and the ethnic minorities of Việt Bắc revived the spirit of the Trần Dynasty (1225-1400) people living in villages, grottos, and caves, who together with royal troops and forces from other districts defeated the Yuan-Mongolian aggressors from China three times. Even a unit of

elderly guerillas from Cao Bằng under the command of a 70-year-old patriarch successfully defended their village against the French. Uncle Hồ composed a poem in their honour:

"Spirit and will are stronger with age

The brandishing of swords to kill the enemy buzz like the autumn wind

Ready to annihilate the adversary

The fame of Việt Bắc will live in glory for thousands of years"

It should be clearly why the command of the expeditionary corps never launched a second strategic offensive against the base region of Việt Bắc during our resistance.

Their autumn-winter offensive was a bitter failure. Their plans to use large-scale military actions to secure an early end to the war vanished like smoke.

On our part, the Việt Bắc victory was due above all to the success of our policy to fight a war by the people — to create cohesion among the army and the people, to cement the bonds between the Kinh, Tày, Nùng, Dao, Mông and others who formed our revolutionary base, and to coordinate their efforts with battlefields all over the country.

This victory was a historical landmark which encouraged the entire population and created the conditions that allowed us to shift the resistance war to a new phase.

Celebration of the 60th birthday anniversary of President Hồ Chí Minh on 19 May 1950

General Giáp on the way to Military Zone 12

CHAPTER V

THE ENEMY REAR – OUR FRONT LINE

1

The Việt Bắc victory lift the spirit of the army and the people and made them confident of final victory in the resistance war. From all regions and war fronts, letters and messages of congratulations poured in. The radio and the press spread views of the significance of the victory and of the fighting waged at Việt Bắc.

I told the Political Department to gather materials, particularly examples of typical skirmishes and battles as well as letters and documents seized from the enemy so that Tạ Quang Bửu and Trần Công Tường could compile a book in French, titled "The French Offensive against Việt Bắc," which would influence French and international public opinion.

On 15 January 1948, half a month after the Việt Bắc victory, the Communist Party of Việt Nam (CPV) convened an enlarged conference of the Central Committee in our base region.

The conference analysed the new developments in the international situation. Many Western European countries had accepted the Marshall Plan. U.S. bases were set up in many places surrounding the Soviet Union, threatening democracy and peace movements that were forming and spreading in the world. The struggle for independence by many peoples remained strong, particularly in Madagascar and Indonesia. In response, the

Chinese Red Army was launching large-scale counter-offensives. In France, after the removal of the communists from the government, French authorities were going to greater lengths to preserve their colonies.

With the development of guerilla warfare in Nam Bộ and the outbreak of resistance war all over the country, especially after the Việt Bắc victory, the conference agreed with the following assessment of the Standing Central Committee: "The balance of force between the enemy and our side has changed. If we can actively and quickly develop our strengths and remedy our weaknesses, then *the Việt Bắc campaign will be the impetus for us to shift to the second phase of our long resistance war.*"[53] The conference foresaw that in the immediate future, the enemy would begin a pacification program, conducting violent sweeps in their zone of occupation, concentrating on Nam Bộ and the southern part of central Việt Nam. They would attempt to create autonomous regions, setting up more puppet administrations at various levels and preparing for the repatriation of Bảo Đại.

Determined to begin a new phase of the resistance war, the conference of the Standing Central Committee decided "to develop the militia and guerilla warfare all over the country, especially in enemy-controlled areas," and "to concentrate our forces to carry out mobile battles against isolated enemy posts, thereby narrowing their area of occupation and at the same time to launch surprise attacks against smaller cities.

2

On 19 January 1948, the Government Council held a meeting. After the Việt Bắc victory, Uncle Hồ had discussed with the Party

53. Author's emphasis.

Central Committee the need to stimulate the morale of the army and to recognize the maturity of the armed forces after two years of fighting. It was deemed necessary to set up the High Command of the National Army of Việt Nam, to determine the rank of a number of army officers, and to award medals to those who had performed courageously. The Party's ideas were welcomed unanimously by the members of the Government Council.

On 20 January 1948, Uncle Hồ signed a decree conferring rank on a number of military leaders and commanders. I was given the rank of General. Nguyễn Sơn, Lê Thiết Hùng, Chu Văn Tấn, Hoàng Sâm, Hoàng Văn Thái, Lê Hiến Mai, Văn Tiến Dũng, Trần Đại Nghĩa, Trần Tử Bình were made one-star Generals. Nam Bộ's army and people had been fighting from the beginning, for over two years. In recognition of this, Uncle Hồ and the Central Committee decided to nominate Nguyễn Bình for Major General. In addition, a number of department-level officers and inter-zone commanders were nominated for the rank of colonel. Ranks were determined for only key officers, not yet for the whole army.

The Government Council intended to organize a ceremony for my nomination as general on 27 May 1948.

For several previous days, it had been raining hard.

On May 27, it was still raining. Rivers and streams were all high and could not be forded. All the delegates had not yet arrived. So the Government Council held a plenary session to settle certain important problems. These included an assessment of the internal situation, an analysis of French intentions and our measures to counter them; and the establishment of new regulations for the civil servants replacing the regime of French functionaries. It was decided that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Finance would study the scale of their salaries. A decree to set up a national emulation committee was promulgated and 19 June 1948 was chosen as the day to launch a

nationwide patriotic emulation movement, on the one thousandth day of the resistance war.

The meeting lasted until midnight, with further discussions the next morning.

On May 28, at 13:00 hours, the army rank nomination ceremony was solemnly celebrated.

A conference hall was set up beside a large stream, under the foliage of forest trees, against the flank of a mountain. The newly-plaited partition walls were flagrant with the smell of fresh bamboo. In the back of the hall stood an altar dedicated to the fatherland with simple decorations: a yellow starred red flag and a vase with mountain flowers, surrounded by red banderoles with the motto: "The protracted resistance war will be won and unification and independence will be achieved." Uncle Hồ and Bùi Bằng Đoàn, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, stood on each side of the altar, with members of the government standing in front. Uncle Hồ, the decree in his hand, called me up. In a solemn and emotional voice, he said: "Today, on behalf of the government and the people..." Suddenly he stopped speaking, took out his handkerchief and wiped his tears. The audience was deeply moved. A short moment later, Uncle Hồ continued: "... In my capacity as president of the DRVN, I confer on you the position of general and request that you direct the troops in order to fulfil the mission entrusted to us by the people..." He gave me the decree. Bùi Bằng Đoàn, on behalf of the National Assembly, and Phan Anh, on behalf of the Government Council, expressed their congratulations. Tạ Quang Bửu, of the Ministry Defence, also congratulated me and on behalf of the entire army, promised to enhance their fighting spirit and bravery under my command. With great and heartfelt emotion, I spoke a few words. I remembered the heroes who had fallen and expressed my deep gratitude to Uncle Hồ, the National Assembly, and the Government for giving me so great an honor. I promised

to devote all my intelligence and energy to fulfill my mission, thereby contributing in a modest way to our struggle for national independence and unification.

After the ceremony, we took seats around Uncle Hồ, and he told us: "... The nomination of brother Giáp and others as generals today is the result of the sacrifice and struggle of many compatriots and comrades. The preceding generations fought for national independence but failed. They closed their eyes without seeing independence and freedom. We are luckier today, but many difficulties still await us. Thousands, tens of thousands of men have fallen for what we have today. We must strive to secure independence and freedom to satisfy the souls of those who have passed away..."

Afterwards, the members of the government stood together for a keepsake photograph.

When news of the event was disseminated on *the Voice of Việt Nam*, a Western correspondent asked Uncle Hồ why so many generals and colonels were nominated at the same time, and by what criteria. Uncle Hồ gave a simple answer: "If they could win victory over a colonel, they were nominated colonels; if they could prevail over a brigadier general, they became brigadier generals. If they were victorious over a general, they became generals."

In August that year, at the fifth military conference, Uncle Hồ spoke about the behavior of a general: "In the army, the task of a general is to be knowledgeable, brave, humane, trustworthy, incorruptible, and loyal. With regard to discipline, an order from above must be obeyed by every combatant; a report to the upper ranks must be honest, timely, realistic... Rewards and punishment must be just and clear-sighted; a reward must not be given because of affection or punishment inflicted because of hatred. A collaborator must not be chosen because of his good relations with us or repudiated because of his straightforwardness or frankness.

With regard to the troops, a commander must understand their speech and behavior, their joys and sorrows, their food and clothing; he must take utmost care of these things. He must share sorrow and happiness with his men. If he does, they will follow him wherever he wants them to go, however dangerous, and will fight bravely if they are ordered to... Our troops, though young, are making rapid progress. If a general does not constantly study and remains stagnant, he will certainly become backward. With regard to the people, if the army can win their affection, confidence, and admiration, it will surely win victory. With regard to the enemy, we should never underestimate them. If we do, we will inevitably meet with failure."

On 7 February 1948, on the day of the Lunar New Year, Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee invited cadres of the Party and State from the base region to celebrate a Tết of solidarity. The holiday was simply organized but full of enthusiasm after the Việt Bắc victory and with the news that the Chinese Red Army were launching strategic counter-offensives from the liberated zone against the Kuomintang zone. Uncle Hồ said at the festivities, "If the French are wise, they will put an end to the war. If they use Bảo Đại to continue the war, their failure will come all the sooner since Bảo Đại does not represent anyone."

3

By the beginning of 1948, the French had expanded their zone of occupation to many parts of Việt Nam. In the South, they occupied all cities and towns. In Central Việt Nam, we still controlled Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh and three provinces in Interzone 5. During the fall and winter of 1947, the French had seized Bắc Cạn, Cao Bằng, Lao Cai, Thất Khê, and Nghĩa Lộ. They controlled almost all of the northwest and the greater

part of the northeast, placing pressure on the base region of Việt Bắc.

To bring the war to a new phase, we resolutely applied a line of resistance by the whole people, as mapped out in the first days of national resistance. Even earlier, when Uncle Hồ had established the army in 1944, he said: "Ours is a people's resistance war, we must mobilize the whole people and arm all of them." Under this strategy, the CPV declared that strictly guerilla tactics would be used.

Here I will outline the fundamental characteristics of guerilla warfare in our country — *Vietnamese guerilla warfare.*

First, I will discuss the characteristics of the battlefield. Some classic military theorists, such as Clausewitz, have spoken about guerilla tactics and asserted that they can be applied only in immense countries such as Russia. Mao Tse-tung also believed that it could be successfully carried out only in extremely large countries like China. Small countries the size of Belgium could not adopt this style of warfare.

When the CPV advocated guerilla tactics, the Vietnamese people responded positively. Their attitude stemmed from their confidence in the Party and from their spirit of indomitability which urged them to stand up against their aggressors. Some cadres, however, wondered whether if it was possible for Việt Nam, a small country with narrow battlefields, to apply guerilla tactics and to win. Small circles had discussed this, although the results were inclusive and party policy was always respected. In the enthusiastic atmosphere of the whole nation coming together to resist, everyone joined the fighting and no more doubt was expressed. Historical reality now has proved a new truth: guerilla warfare fought by a small country — Việt Nam — was a success.

Guerilla warfare is fought by the people with or without rifles, using any weapon available even spears, knives, sticks. It is

warfare fought by the whole people: men, women, the old, the young. It is warfare fought by small military units, generally the size of a group, a section, a platoon, sometimes a company. The people carry out activities suitable to their capability, including quite a few actions that only they can achieve. A fundamental characteristic of our people's resistance war is that it allows fighting even in enemy-occupied zones and places where the army is absent or has pulled out.

A number of writers on the Indochinese war have claimed that our guerillas used their numerical superiority to prevail over the enemy, pitting ten men against one, as the Chinese guerilla brigades: "To concentrate large forces against smaller parts of the enemy is one of the principles of the battlefield in guerilla warfare." But the Vietnamese did not have the ability, nor were the conditions right to organize large guerilla brigades like China or the Soviet Union. Our tactical principle stems from a traditional principle: to use a weak force against a strong one, to use a small number of troops against a larger force. A platoon, a section, a group, a combatant, an ordinary citizen can fight with bravery and creativeness, finding a way to defeat the enemy.

The realities of the battlefield and our fighting force produced another characteristic of Vietnamese guerilla warfare. In the Chinese revolutionary war, guerilla meant "to move and fight" and the war was characterized by movement. Our guerillas on the contrary remained with their village, commune, or factory. In big battles, they coordinated with the army. Each person or guerilla did not "move and fight" but remained in his locality. Even when he moved, he moved within his locality because of his ties to his co-villagers and his understanding of the local terrain and topography. There he was capable of taking innumerable small actions to thwart the enemy, with or without gun firing. These fundamental characteristics of Vietnamese guerilla warfare meant that we could fight even in enemy-occupied areas and in

places where our army was absent. We fought a creative guerilla warfare suited to our people and our small, not yet densely populated country. Our guerillas formed an invisible net covering the country, pinning down the omnipresent expeditionary troops, decimating a large part of them, bogging them down and giving them no outlet.

From mid-1947, the militia and guerillas became a constituent part of the national army of Việt Nam. To further develop the guerilla war, the Militia Division in the High Command was changed in early 1948 into the Militia Department headed by Lê Liêm and a militia division was set up in each military zone. A militia command was established in each province, district, and commune under their respective provincial, district, and communal resistance committees. Village and communal militia included then a small number of guerillas who were released from production work, while most guerillas continued production work. On April 15, the second national conference on the militia was held, led by Trường Chinh, Văn Tiến Dũng, and I. Uncle Hồ came to address delegates from all parts of the country. He praised the good points of the militia and pointed out some shortcomings; he said that we must make the militia and the guerillas our foundation, better organize those guerillas released from production work, closely coordinate actions with the national guards, keep the initiative at all times, locate the enemy to fight, and turn many small victories into a big one. Before the general insurrection, Uncle Hồ had written a booklet entitled: *Experience of Guerilla Warfare in China.* On this occasion, he wrote *Experience of Guerilla Warfare in France* and composed a poem calling upon everyone to apply guerilla tactics using all available weapons:

No matter young or old,

man or woman, everyone

must wage guerilla war

having no rifles

we use knives

we use pickaxes

we use rakes

we take shoulder poles

we pull out hedge rows...

to beat them down.

In the years of preparation for the general insurrection, I had written *The Việt Minh Ngũ Tự Kinh* which included ten poems of five-word verses. One of them spoke about using our guerilla tactics as propagation materials to encourage more people to join the national salvation organizations within the Việt Minh. The manual was written in the Kinh language which I painfully translated into the Tày, Dao, and Mông languages.[54] The ethnic minorities of Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn and Lạng Sơn provinces learned Uncle Hồ's articles by heart as well as *The Việt Minh Ngũ Tự Kinh*. It was common to meet girls from ethnic groups from the plains to the mountains singing guerilla warfare poems while looking for firewood or threshing rice.

54. The poem about guerilla warfare is as follows:
The guerillas wage secret battles
The enemy have eyes but they are like blind men
Barbed wire is cut, they hear nothing
They have ears but they are like deaf men
We must destroy all roads
They have legs but they are like lame men
All foodstuffs must be hidden
They will have no food and water and will starve
We make surprise attacks
We take weapons from the enemy with which we fight them
Though they have planes and tanks
They can do nothing

The order "To Start Guerilla Warfare: The Fundamental Military Task for This Period" outlined the task of the militia and guerillas as follows:

"First, harassment: a flare, a piece of cast iron which looks like a mine, a round of flintlock, some booby traps on a road used by the enemy, a hand grenade, a land mine killing a few adversary troops, are actions to be widely multiplied. Isolated battles with a trophy of one rifle or some bullets must be encouraged.

"Second, destroying roads and cutting the enemy's cable and telephone lines is extremely important. This will greatly reduce their offensive might and make our troops' activities more efficient. Such sabotage must be considered military exploits.

"Third, eliminate spies and prevent spying.

"Fourth, try to annihilate small parts of the enemy's forces and fight them together with our army.

"The guiding principle of guerilla activity is: activeness, secrecy, rapidity, and risk avoidance. Follow the motto: *the more we fight, the stronger we become.*"

This was precisely what our army and people had done in South Việt Nam, bogging down nearly half of the French expeditionary corps who had five hundred military posts and carried out continuous sweeps of various scales. This was also what our army and people had done in the battles inside cities and enemy-occupied zones during the past year. If these actions became generalized, they would consume the strength of the expeditionary corps and turn Việt Nam into a bottomless abyss for the French.

It was necessary to keep the people motivated and develop guerilla warfare throughout the country. The independent companies and armed propagation units were entrusted with the following heavy mission:

"To mobilize the people, to safeguard them, to help them in production work.

"To destroy quisling administrations, to eliminate spies, to decimate the enemy; to win over enemy troops, to dissolve puppet organizations or to turn them into double-faced administrations, to reestablish the people's power wherever possible .

"To build political and armed forces while carrying out activities, to organize the militia, the guerillas, and local troops; to withdraw the independent companies and merge them with the main forces when necessary."

We fought the war to the enemy's rear, turning it into our front line. We thus actually started a strategic counter-offensive, all over the country which aimed at the whole expeditionary corps and its puppet administration.

4

In Spring 1947, many of our units, battalions and regiments had been driven out of French-occupied areas one after another because they were not able to find a safe foothold. Sometimes, they had to pull out because of food and ammunition shortages. Many units received orders to return to their zones of operation, but it was difficult to keep such long rows of troops from being detected. Each time they were detected by the French, they were obliged to fight disadvantageous battles and were driven out again.

One year later, using independent companies, armed propagation units, working teams, and many of our troops, we had returned to the enemy-occupied areas working our way through the belt of enemy posts and thick net of enemy spies and agents fairly smoothly and quietly. We could now thrush deeply into the enemy's rear without being detected.

In regions where all our underground agents had been wiped out, it took more time and harder work to create a basis of operation. Night after night, our officers and troops, from abandoned temples, a grave yard on the field, an isolated grotto, a bush by a stream, snaked into the villages, contacting each inhabitant and family to learn the situation. Sometimes, they suddenly appeared in a crowd on market day, among those attending mass at a church or a Buddhist festival in a pagoda, to call upon the people to stand up in struggle. Then they disappeared before the enemy arrived. Our troops returned to the methods used by armed propagation units before the general insurrection. Step by step they reestablished their bases, restored the underground guerilla organizations and recovered their foothold. The cadres, Party members, and guerillas who had been driven out of the area now followed the armed forces to return to their villages.

By the end of 1948, with the exception of the main-force regiments of the High Command, other army regiments retained their commands and just one concentrated battalion and dispersed the rest of their forces into 103 independent companies. These companies entered enemy-occupied zones and disputed areas to act as local district companies. Two fifths of the zonal main forces, and not one third as originally planned, became independent companies.

In the North, our concern had long been the mountain regions of the northwest and the northeast. The northwest was a particularly important strategic region not only for Việt Bắc but also for Indochina. During the early preparations for the general insurrection, I had thought of forming two military prongs: a western one spreading from Việt Bắc to Yên Bái and Hòa Bình and an eastern one that would encircle Hà Nội via Tiên Du (Bắc Ninh), in case the French decided to first occupied the capital. During the first days of the resistance war, we had sent military units to the

western war front to fight and build bases in the mountain region adjoining Laos.

After returning to Việt Bắc, I repeatedly discussed our large-scale strategic plan with Trần Tử Bình, who was then a member of the Central Military Committee, and with a number of key cadres. The first step would be the liberation of the northwest, Hòa Bình, and assisting the Lao people to liberate Northern Laos, thereby creating a spring board from which a strategic advance direction would be opened and our main force would be able to follow the Mekong River and advance to Nam Bộ.

During discussions with Bùi Quang Tạo, Song Hào, and Lê Trọng Tấn, we realized that conditions were not yet ripe for bringing large units back to the northwest, Lai Châu was the only province where revolutionary power had not been established during the August revolution; Sơn La had been recaptured by the French after a short period of people's power. The French had created the so-called Thai autonomous region, frenziedly carrying out sweeps and building a thick system of military posts. They relied on the local authorities (*phìa, tạo, thổ ty*) to strictly control the ethnic minorities. We had to act slowly, step by step, and make careful preparations. I suggested using the experience of the brigades who had gone south before the general insurrection. Groups of armed propagation units, the majority of them ethnic fighters who understood the region went first to open the way. They made contacts, established bases deep in each region, and paved the way for independent companies to follow. Each company was associated with one locality and developed popular movements there; the localities were linked to each other to form an uninterrupted base area. In coordination with these activities, the concentrated battalions would be able to stage a number of resounding battles and enlarge their base.

On 20 January 1948, after the Central Committee meeting, I signed the instructions entrusting Inter-zone 10 (composed of

Zones 10 and 14) with the task of organizing groups of propagation vanguard in the four northwestern provinces to establish bases, secure a foothold, enlarge the northwestern base, open the way to Laos, and prepare for the future advance to Nam Bộ. A short time later, the interzone reported that four groups of propagation vanguard, Quyết Thắng, Trung Dũng, Quyết Tiến and Lào Bắc, each commanded by competent political and military cadres had been organized and were ready to set out. I went to Inter-zone 10 to work with the inter-zonal Party organization in a palm forest in Phú Thọ province. Then I went to Đào Giã, Vũ Ẻn, crossed the Thao river, and covered another leg of road through hills of palm trees and swamps before arriving in Cẩm Khê district. There I met Lê Trọng Tấn and the officers and men of the Sơn La regiment who had just been called back. Among them were troops who had been recently designated to be members of the groups of propagation vanguard.

The task of our combatants this time was extremely difficult. They would have to cover hundreds of kilometers through forests and areas strictly controlled by the enemy, deprived of support bases. Long days of hardship, privation and disease awaited them. I talked to them about the important position and role of the northwest in our resistance war and to the broader revolution in Indochinese countries, and about the necessity of liberating the people in the northwest from their wretched conditions under the French. I reminded them of the task entrusted to them by Uncle Hồ which was to build good popular bases and to succeed in hoisting the yellow-starred red flag on the land of Điện Biên Phủ.

5

Regarding the French military disposition on the Bắc Bộ battlefield, the north-west, the north-east and the chain of military

posts spanning over Lạng Sơn-Cao Bằng-Bắc Cạn were constantly threatened, besides, Highway 5 was an extremely important battlefield.

For the enemy, Highway 5 was an arterial road linking its leading bodies with Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, the principal logistic bases in the North. For us, the greater part of human and material resources conveyed from the Bắc Bộ plain, and partly from Thanh Hóa and Nghệ Tĩnh, to the Việt Bắc base region and other places must overcome the obstacles set along this highway. From the very beginning of the war, the French had concentrated on clearing this corridor. Crack units of the French Foreign Legion and puppet troops engaged in a hundred violent sweeps against the communes on both sides of the road. They set up military posts in all key places. Their motto "to burn everything, kill everything, and destroy everything" was put into practice in order to create a no-man's land. Quisling administrations were set up and patrols and sentries were organized all day long. A French artillery regiment pounded the roads leading to their bases to prevent the approach of our troops. Fierce attacks against disputed areas were launched to enlarge the belt defending Highway 5 in the area of Hải Dương.

In the summer of 1947 in a meeting with the commanders of the military zone of Yên Giã, Đại Từ district, to discuss activities around Highway 5, I said to Hoàng Minh Thảo, commander of War Zone 3: "Here is the fiercely disputed area between us and the enemy. It will be necessary to use teams of underground guerillas and groups from the propagation armed units to build and safeguard our bases. We must also organize double-faced administrations, start an all-out war on communication lines, particularly by ambush and mining in order to maintain our liaison and transport lines."

In February 1948, to implement the High Command's policy, War Front 5 was set up to unify and direct all the forces fighting in

the Highway 5 area. The war front commander was Dương Hữu Miên, head of Regiment 42; Nguyễn Năng Hách, chairman of Hải Dương province, was political commissar. Đỗ Mười and Nguyễn Khai, on behalf of the Party committee of Inter-zone 3, assumed the direct leadership of the war front. Early in May, War Front 5 launched the first counter-offensive against Highway 5. The offensive did not produce the expected results because it relied exclusively on the military activities of our main forces. They did not closely coordinate with the local forces, and their military activities were not connected to our economic and political actions against the enemy.

In the meantime, cadres, guerillas and the armed propagation units had entered the enemy's rear to build bases, to mobilize the people, and to live or to die with them in the struggle against the French. Even in populous residential areas such as Kẻ Sặt where there were more than ten French posts, the local population protected the cadres, took care of wounded soldiers, and helped the troops obtain information on the French. The inhabitants of the communes of Ái Quốc (Nam Sách district), Như Quỳnh (Văn Lâm district), and Bình Định (Cẩm Giàng district) made hundreds of secret dugouts to hide revolutionary workers. Some families had as many as six dugouts in their house and garden; some were located by the fence around enemy positions. In Kim Huy commune (Mỹ Hào district), the family of Mr. Nguyễn Huy Cường accommodated half a section of troops who were preparing mines for Highway 5. The enemy scented the scheme and searched the house for the secret dugouts. They ordered Mr. Cường and his wife to show them the dugouts, threatening to kill their children one after another every 15 minutes. After 45 minutes all the three children had been shot dead. Mr. Cường laid bare his chest, defying the French to shoot him. Terrified, they took him away to their camp. Our combatants had been protected. Such examples of heroic sacrifices in order to safeguard cadres occurred all over the country.

In October 1948, the command of War Front 5 launched the second general offensive against Highway 5. The guerillas of Trần Hưng Đạo commune used mines to destroy a railway engine and eight cars killing or wounding hundreds of French soldiers. A woman guerilla, Nguyễn Thị Ái, used mines to overthrow a railway engine in Kim Thành, killing 30 French troops. The company of Vũ Hổ, the troops of Văn Lâm, and those of Kim Thành also blew up several enemy trains. In total, twenty-six enemy trains were blown up on Highway 5, chiefly during the last months of the year. A number of fighters, including Quách Phù and Nguyễn Văn Sóc, specialized in laying mines; they became known as "kings of mining attacks on Highway 5." The armed forces of An Dương district (Hải Phòng) in coordination with the workers of the Hải Phòng Railway Station waged many battles, destroying many enemy trains. They were given the title of the "Lion of Highway 5."

At the end of November 1948, I presided over the conference of the Hà Nội - Highway 5 (Hải Phòng) warfront which was convened by the High Command. Participants included representatives from the resistance committees and the economic blockade committees of Hà Nội, Hải Dương, Kiến An and Hải Phòng; commanders of guerillas along Highway 5; commanders of independent companies' commando groups; and zonal main-force units. Concluding the conference, I stressed the importance of the warfront pointing out: "Our strategy at present is not only aimed at breaking the enemy's political and economic schemes in general, but also at dealing a hard blow to the enemy's rear in order to destroy their political and economic forces and to disturb their rear area... When applying this strategy in Bắc Bộ, Hà Nội must be considered the most important political and military battlefield, and Hải Phòng and Highway 5 as the most important military and economic battlefields in the enemy's rear. Our task is to turn Hà Nội and Hải Phòng into a battlefield thus cutting off Highway 5."

Highway 5 became "the terrible road" for the French. In 1948 the Defense Ministry and the High Command praised the battlefield as "the first typical battlefield in the enemy's rear, the coastal region and the plains."

A long and narrow battlefield, Bình Trị Thiên was not a primary zone of French activity. But for us, this pan-handle region was important because it linked Thanh - Nghệ - Tĩnh with Zone 5, the North with the South. The Inter-zonal Party committee and the command of Zone 4, under the motto "Everything reserved for Bình - Trị - Thiên," mobilized tens of independent companies and hundreds of cadres and Party members who penetrated into the enemy's rear to restore bases, develop guerilla warfare, and to push the resistance war forward during the "days of uprising in undaunted struggle." In the battle of mobile warfare in Đồng Dương, a company of Africans and Europeans was neatly annihilated. The ambush at Hói Mít completely destroyed an enemy train carrying 80 tons of armaments and killed or captured alive the members of its escorting company. A Western journalist wrote, "death is hanging over the heads of the French expeditionary troops, at times even a wind blowing or a current flowing startles them..."

On the battlefield of Zone 5 and in the extreme south of Trung Bộ, the formula "independent companies, concentrated battalions" and efforts of the armed working groups of Regiments 120, 80, 83, 108 and others was efficiently applied. Guerilla warfare developed on the outskirts of Đà Nẵng, Nha Trang and Ninh Hòa. Many surprise attacks and ambushes were staged on the Hải Vân pass and along the railway route between Nha Trang and Phan Thiết, killing the non-commissioned officers of Tabor company in Quảng Nam, destroying many French posts or compelling their men to surrender. Hundreds of thousands of people in Đại Lộc and Duy Xuyên were liberated. Việt Minh combatants along with political cadres advanced to Tây Nguyên

(the Central Highlands) to combine their military attacks with the building of bases and resistance areas in Kontum, Đắc Lắc and other places.

In addition to guerilla warfare, our agitation work among enemy troops sought to win human hearts and to wake up patriotism in every Vietnamese who, for one reason or another, had sided with the French. The CPV considered this work to be of strategic significance, especially when the French expanded their recruitment of puppet troops and quisling administrators. In 1948, this agitation work began eroding enemy military posts and partisan units. In many rural areas, newly established puppet administrations began to help the resistance. The people called these administrations "double-faced quisling administrations" and "national salvation puppets." Around the end of 1948, on order of the Central Committee, the general destruction of puppet administrations took place in all enemy rear areas to smash the administrative machinery of the French and restore the revolutionary power in many places. Bringing war to the enemy's rear naturally led to more and more violent French sweeps.

From the very beginning, in Bắc Bộ and still earlier in Nam Bộ, "resistance villages" and "the resistance hamlets" had appeared. Bamboo hedges, hills, meadows, canals, lakes and ponds around the village as well as communication trenches, tunnels and dugouts formed a defense line checking the enemy's advance. Many villages were divided into lines or quarters and provided with fighting pockets, trenches and secret tunnels which were linked to one another to ensure mobility in fighting. A system of watchtowers was set up both inside and outside the village. Besides separate resistance villages, in some places, clusters of resistance villages were organized.

The people organized their resistance villages in order to stay in their native places and continue production work while fighting the enemy and sabotaging their sweep operations. The

resistance villages also served as springboards for attacking the enemy, and for waging political struggle and agitation work among enemy troops. They, therefore, became the principal targets of French offensives and sweeps in the guerilla zone. In 1948 and 1949, three fourths of thousands of French sweeps on the plains of Bắc Bộ were against resistance villages. Sometimes, the French used small commando units to attack, but more often they used large forces supported by artillery pounding and air bombing to encircle the guerillas. They laid ambushes outside the village to arrest out cadres, soldiers, and guerillas. When they succeeded in entering a village, they searched every corner, burned houses and massacred the people.

The army and the villagers became adept at various forms of fighting. Outside the village, the enemy was decimated by mines, booby traps, and snipers who shot at them from trenches. Using the natural terrain and artificial fortifications, including a system of barricades, obstacles, and dugouts, our army and guerillas could suddenly appear and fight hand-to-hand using grenades, rifles, and even spears to annihilate the enemy when they came into the village. Some villages became very well known. Among them were Đình Bảng (Bắc Ninh), Chi Lăng (Lạng Sơn), Vật Lại (Sơn Tây), Cảnh Dương, Cự Nẫm (Quảng Bình), Xitơ zone with hero Núp (Gia Lai), and Tân Phú Trung with its underground tunnels, precursor of the famous district of Củ Chi. The resistance villages represented the undaunted spirit of the Vietnamese people and posed a challenge to the French. They became the fortress of the people's war in the locality and a unique characteristic of the war in Việt Nam.

Bringing war to the enemy's rear was an effective and creative policy and accredit to the CPV. Only one year after the outbreak of the war, our young army had launched a "soft" strategic counter-offensive against the enemy on a national scale. By changing the enemy's rear into a battlefield and our front line, we upset the rules

of the game and ensured stability for our rear. This new battlefield kept the French mired, compelling them to change their offensive against our main forces into ineffective sweeps. It allowed us to deal direct blows to the French colonialist policy of making "war to pursue the war" and using "the Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese." This was the greatest success of the Việt Minh in 1948. The promotion of guerilla warfare throughout the enemy's rear brought about a substantial change in the people's war, shifting it to a new phase.

6

As we had assessed in Nam Bộ, the French concentrated their forces in 1948 and stepped up military activities in order to force "a political solution" under which a pro-French quisling administration could be set up using Bảo Đại. Nam Bộ had initiated guerilla warfare as soon as the French began their second invasion. During the previous two years, guerilla warfare in Nam Bộ had made dramatic progress. The guerillas in communes, inter-communes, and inter-districts were able to cope with small-scale French sweep operations. With large-scale sweeps, the Nam Bộ armed forces learned "to evolve" with the enemy.

The Đồng Tháp Mười (Plain of Reeds) base, located 20 km from Saigon, became the bull's eye at which the enemy aimed many operations. In February 1948, the Véga operation took place. This was similar to the offensive launched against Việt Bắc in Autumn-Winter 1947. The French Command mobilized eleven battalions, including two battalions of parachutists and two detachments of marines. They also mobilized units of armored vehicles and amphibians with air and artillery support in order to destroy the leading organs of the resistance and the armed forces of Nam Bộ. From the south, east, and north, the French gradually tightened their encirclement of the Đồng Tháp Mười base. All

morning of February 14, the encirclement tightened around the central part of the base, along an 80 km perimeter. Battalions of French troops swept the region on amphibians, searching for four days in inundated fields covered with thick grass and cajeput. A number of encounters took place with the Việt Minh, but on the last day when the encirclement was finally narrowed, the French discovered that the fields were empty. All the command offices, troops, arms factories, hospitals, and broadcasting stations had vanished. The largest French offensive in Nam Bộ had failed.

At the end of July 1948, the Nam Bộ Party committee held an enlarged conference presided over by Lê Duẩn and Phạm Hùng.[55] The conference concluded that from the French's point of view, "Nam Bộ had become the center of political activity and an important military position." The French were using force to set up a puppet administration and to launch a strategic offensive against our potential supporters, hoping to exhaust our human resources, food, and armament supplies. If they succeeded, our main forces would be annihilated. The conference decided to develop the militia to defend our reserve potential, to sabotage the enemy's reserve, and to expand resistance villages. At the same time, it concluded that "the strong main force must be available for waging large battles."

After the conference, the zonal Party committee proposed that Uncle Hồ and the Central Committee dispatch a competent military cadre to build and command the main force. Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee thought it advisable to send a delegation on behalf of the Party and the State to visit Nam Bộ to share fighting strategies. The High Command was entrusted with drafting the order to be sent to Nam Bộ. Lê Đức Thọ, a member of

55. Later, Lê Duẩn became General Secretary of the CPV Central Committee. Phạm Hùng became a member of the Politburo of CPV Central Committee and Prime Minister.

the Standing Central Committee, was appointed leader of the delegation, although publicly, Phạm Ngọc Thạch, Vice Minister of the President's Office, headed the delegation since the Party was still carrying out underground activities. Lê Hiến Mai and a number of military cadres were also members of the delegation sent to reinforce Nam Bộ.

The order to Nam Bộ stated: "The resistance war in Nam Bộ is spontaneous, independent, and self-reliant... Deprived of forests and rugged mountains, forests and mountains of people have been created, and bases for long-term resistance have been built up... Guerilla warfare in Nam Bộ is strong because it is based on the people." The order went on to point out the fundamental tasks of Nam Bộ. Politically, it had to win over the population in both urban and rural areas and attach importance to various religions, the Khmer ethnics, and the different strata of the Hoa people. Militarily, it had to continue to step up guerilla warfare about which the key question was to create "independent companies" and "concentrated battalions." It had to pay utmost attention to the base area in the eastern mountain region, the Plain of Reeds, the U Minh forests; the most important being the forests and mountains in the east. In the cities, especially Saigon, it had regarded political struggles as the main form of struggle in combination with the activities of the groups of commandos and political workers, on the principle of preserving the city bases. Guerilla warfare should advance to mobile warfare by building up the militia and guerillas at the village level and local forces in the district and the province until each zone could have a concentrated battalion and then a regiment when conditions were ripe.

In mid-September the Lê Đức Thọ delegation left for Nam Bộ, bringing along many documents, including Trường Chinh's work *The Resistance Is Bound to Win*, *The Order to Nam Bộ*, and some other important texts of the High Command including "Develop Guerilla Warfare: The Fundamental Military Task in the Current

Period," the order "Independent Companies, Concentrated Battalions," and "Project of Building the Production of Arms." On September 21, it was learned that twenty French planes had dropped parachutists on Vân Đình in Hà Đông the previous day. At the same time a large number of French forces had gone to Vân Đình from Hà Đông. This information concerned Uncle Hồ and all of us. A delegation from Nam Bộ traveling North was present at Vân Đình. The Lê Đức Thọ delegation had planned to meet the Nam Bộ delegation before continuing their journey to the South.[56] Around the end of September, the Nam Bộ delegation arrived in Việt Bắc.

Trần Văn Trà,[57] leader of Zone 8, headed the delegation. Other members included Trần Bửu Kiếm, Nguyễn Thị Định,[58] Lương Văn Trọng representing General Nguyễn Bình, a delegate from Bình Xuyên, a priest representing the Catholics in Nam Bộ, and painter Diệp Minh Châu. Ms. Định had visited the North once in 1946 to ask for the transport of armaments to the South by sea. The other delegates had come North for the first time.

The delegation's difficult journey from Nam Bộ to Việt Bắc lasted eight months. When it passed by Vân Đình, the local population organized a solemn welcome meeting under the brilliant light of electric lamps. The underground organization of inner Hà Nội City informed them that the French had intended to capture this very important delegation. Uncle Hồ received the delegation in the conference room of the President's Office, a large thatch house in the forest by a stream. The tables were

56. Early in May 1940, the Lê Đức Thọ delegation arrived in Nam Bộ safely. It did not meet the Trần Văn Trà delegation that was on its way to the North.
57. Trần Văn Trà was a general of the PAVN.
58. Nguyễn Thị Định was a woman from Nam Bộ who later stirred up the insurrection movement in Bến Tre and in the entire South during the anti-US resistance war.

covered with flowered cloth and decorated with vases of forest flowers. Receiving the delegation with Uncle Hồ were the members of the Government Council, Uncle Tôn,[59] who was President of the National Front Liên Việt, Mr. Phan Kế Toại,[60] Father Phạm Bá Trực,[61] and Mr. Trần Duy Hưng.[62] The delegation brought gifts from the people of the South to Uncle Hồ and the Government. Uncle Hồ was deeply moved when painter Diệp Minh Châu offered him a work drawn with the painter's own blood. The picture showed Uncle Hồ with three children surrounding him, symbolizing the North, Central, and Southern zones. One of the children lovingly stroking the president's beard.

The next day, Trần Văn Trà gave a report on the resistance war in Nam Bộ since the signing of the 6 March 1946 Accord. Uncle Hồ, Trường Chinh, and I listened to the report. Because of Trà's report, we had better knowledge of the war situation in Nam Bộ which we had previously known about only from messages. The resistance war in Nam Bộ had many specific characteristics.

The insurrection in Sài Gòn had won success less than one month before when the French began their reconquest. Thereafter, the French expeditionary corps entered the country in mass. At first, most of the resistance forces were security units of the former Saigon administration and of the Bình Xuyên, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious sects. Although patriotic and large in number, they were poorly equipped and not well organized or commanded in a unified manner. As such, they could not stand firm in the face of the enemy's strong attacks. A majority of the forces were workers or peasants, armed with flintlocks, sticks,

59. Later President of the SRVN.

60, 61, 62. Patriotic personalities, later high ranking cadres of the government, or revolutionary mass organizations.

and scimitars, hiding behind hand-made barricades, organizing front lines and blocking the river ways to check the advance of the enemy. They had waged resounding battles on Thị Nghè bridge, Bông bridge, Bến Phan bridge, and in Đầm market. After their front was broken, these resistance forces spread out into rural areas and began waging guerilla warfare everywhere. The Nam Tiến ("go southward") units cooperated closely with the army and people of Nam Bộ to fight the enemy in Lái Thiêu and intercept the French from north Saigon to Phan Thiết, Phan Rang. The CPV decided to divide Nam Bộ into three war zones and to reorganize the armed forces, creating battalions of liberation troops out of units of republican guards and the Bình Xuyên and appointing all Party members, many of whom had just been released from the Côn Đảo (Poulo Condor)[63] jails. They became zonal and provincial resistance leaders and took over the leadership of the military units, including those of the religious sects. The resistance war in Nam Bộ overcame its extremely difficult early days and stood firm thanks to people's high patriotism and absolute confidence in Uncle Hồ's leadership.

A popular people's struggle evolved all over Nam Bộ. The political struggle in the cities escalated. Workers organized strikes, students left their schools, merchants refused to hold markets, and thousands of intellectuals petitioned against the quisling administration, many taking to the streets to demand the execution of Bảo Đại. The armed forces of Nam Bộ prepared anti-sweep operations, destroyed communication lines, organized economic sabotage and built bases and fighting villages. The dispersed units that had been merged with the people in order to wage guerilla warfare began to be organized into a number of strong battalions. Battalion 307 encircled enemy posts and

63. An island in the southeast of Việt Nam. The French built a system of jails for political prisoners there.

annihilated the reinforcements who came from Mộc Hóa, La Bang. On his way to the North Trần Văn Trà received news of the victories of La Ngà on Highway 20 and in Tầm Vu in the Mekong River Delta. These were well-known ambushes staged by the main force troops of Nam Bộ. The resistance war fought by the heroic and creative people of Nam Bộ stood firm, evolving over three years of extremely difficult conditions against an adversary several times stronger.

CHAPTER VI

GUERILLA MOBILE WARFARE AND THE STRATEGY OF ATTACKS AGAINST MILITARY POSTS

1

At the start of our national resistance war, the army of Việt Nam had about 85,000 people, organized into regiments and battalions, which were supported by the local people. They were poorly equipped and had never been trained in battle. Early on, we planned to use these forces should war break out. If they were deployed for big battles, however, they would be easily smashed. The Standing Central Committee Instruction on National Resistance, dated 22 December 1946, directed us in the tactical method to be used by our main forces, namely, "the strict use of the guerilla mobile warfare."

Mobility was the only way for us to avoid both passivity and the decisive enemy attacks aimed at destroying our young armed forces. Mobility allowed us to recover the initiative by selecting our battles, springing previously prepared surprise attacks, and hitting the enemy where their defenses were weak and when their vigilance was relaxed. This allowed a weak army to efficiently fight an adversary several times stronger, while preserving its own strength under the guiding principle "the more an army fights, the stronger it becomes." "Mobility" sometimes only meant shifting the troops

to a place that was easier to camouflage or where there was plenty of food for them to rest or to be trained in relatively safer conditions. In such cases "mobile" only meant moving troops, not necessarily carrying out a tactical plan.

The main characteristic of guerilla warfare waged by the people using small military units is to stick to local areas, appearing and disappearing in the locality itself. Fighting by the main forces is, on the contrary, characterized by constant mobility and surprise attacks. These two forces must cooperate closely, especially since we deployed our main forces in independent companies and concentrated battalions. The enemy was faced with a new form of warfare they had never met and never read about in any military institute's manual; it was a warfare without a front, without objective, using surprise attacks from directions the enemy believed to be completely calm.

During the first months of the countrywide war, our troops were not accustomed to the tactic of "guerilla mobile warfare" and war fronts were broken in some places. With more experience, the situation was rectified and our troops applied this tactic with good results using mobile ambushes and inflicting big losses on the enemy who came to rescue the besieged Nam Định front and in our surprise attack on Hải Phòng City after the enemy had just sent troops out for sweep operations, obliging them to bring back their forces. During the French's autumn-winter offensive against Việt Bắc, Việt Minh troops moved and fought the enemy very efficiently with ambushes on Highway 4, Highway 3, and the Lô River war fronts.

In Spring 1948, our troops staged many ambushes on important axes of communications with excellent results. Highway 4 in Bắc Bộ became a road of fire for the enemy. Many ambushes took place on national highways, on the Hải Vân pass, on roads through the Central Highlands. The troops of Nam Bộ carried out many highly successful ambushes.

On 7 March 1948, the Biên Hòa regiment ambushed a convoy in La Ngà, on the Sài Gòn-Đà Lạt Road, destroying 60 out of 70 French vehicles. Colonel Parust, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Expeditionary Corps, was killed on the spot. Colonel De Sérigné, Commander of Foreign Legion Brigade 13, who had just returned from a sweep in Đồng Tháp Mười, was captured. The La Ngà battle shocked the French at home since Nam Bộ was considered a completely pacified region. More than 20 years later, in his memoirs, Salan referred to the La Ngà battle as "a marvelous battle both from the point of view of organization and command"; the Vietnamese had chosen the opportune moment to open fire resulting in an "unfortunate battle" for the expeditionary corps. About one month later, on 18 April 1948, the troops of Zone 9 waged the battle of Tầm Vu, rapidly destroying a French convoy of 24 vehicles and capturing a great quantity of weapons, including a 105-mm gun. The salient feature of the Tầm Vu battle was that our troops had won success in an ambush carried out in an open plain region having many canals and waterways.

During the first years of our resistance, mobile warfare as waged by the Việt Minh contained many characteristics of guerilla warfare. We discussed questions of terrain and topography, day versus night attack, fighting the enemy at a distance or close range. Our goal was to limit as much as possible the enemy's superiority in weapons and war materials, especially the firepower of their artillery, tanks, and planes. The most resounding victories of Việt Minh troops were won in forest and mountain regions at night with close range fighting. Fighting in mountain regions, our troops were covered by the forests while the enemy was surrounded by them. In such terrain, French firepower could not be easily brought into play. By fighting at night our forces could come close to the enemy without being detected. In hand-to-hand combat, we could capitalize on the fighting spirit of our forces and it was difficult for the French to use their long-range firepower. Fighting the enemy in forest and mountain regions at night using hand-to-hand combat

became our troops' forte, even later. I would like to speak here about the deployment of fairly large forces who fight for a fairly long periods on open plains. The advisability of this was studied throughout the years of our resistance against the French. This style of battle limited the fighting capability of our troops. In open terrain they could only wage small battles using careful camouflage, attacking in surprise, fighting rapidly, and withdrawing quickly. It was not until the Việt Minh forces launched their offensive and encirclement of Điện Biên Phủ that the answer to the question of the wisdom of large forces fighting continuously for many days came.

The guerilla mobile warfare waged by Việt Minh was quite different from the large-scale mobile warfare used in modern wars, with large brigades coming from afar and advancing deep into the enemy's zone, encircling and destroying large contingents of the enemy which were moving or newly garrisoned on an extensive battlefield. The guerilla mobile warfare used by the Việt Minh was the transitional tactic of a young army operating with battalion and regiment sized units. It was the fighting form of a transitional phase. Time proved that this creative tactical method enhanced our efficiency on the battlefield, helped avoid failure and brought significant successes to our side. It included ambushes, surprise attacks, and the destruction of enemy forces on the move or who had not yet had time to consolidate their fortifications. This small-scale guerilla mobile warfare developed to large-scale mobile battles, both inside and outside the enemy's fortifications.

As we entered 1949, when our task was to shift the war to a new phase, the difference between the fighting styles and requirements of the militia and guerillas and those of the main forces had become clearer and clearer. Our guiding principle became: "guerilla warfare is fundamental, mobile warfare is supplementary."[64]

64. In 1951, when General De Lattre built a defensive line of bunkers, some people proposed to the Central Committee of the CPV that we temporarily return to "guerilla mobile warfare."

2

If the people's war waged by the Vietnamese had its own peculiarities, the French colonialists' war of aggression was far from ordinary. After the failure of the so-called "military promenade" of General Leclerc, resulting from the development of guerilla warfare in Nam Bộ, the French expeditionary corps had to resort to the classic tactics of an army of aggression, that is, occupation and pacification. Land occupation began with tanks and artillery paving the way for an operation, and planes and war vessels supporting the advance of infantry units. Then, the offensive troops would withdraw, leaving a small number of troops and low-ranking officers to set up military posts and assume "the military administration." They restored local authorities of the former colonial period and organized "the partisans" to eliminate the resistance forces and ensure security in the newly-occupied region.

Such military posts appeared in our country as early as the first invasion by Lyautay and Galliéni. Relying on the military posts, they carried out pacification using a method known as "spilling oil." This tactic in the new situation was planned with the equipment level and the tactical capability of the Việt Minh armed forces in each region in mind.

In Nam Bộ, at the outset, the French used temples, pagodas or solid brick houses for their garrisons. De Latour, who replaced Nyo as commander of French troops in Nam Bộ, set up "watch towers" which were five to six meters tall, built with bricks, bamboo, wood, or other local materials. They were garrisoned by half or one full section commanded by a French officer or non-commission officer. With their thick network of "watch towers," the French controlled large plain regions, observed the activities of the Việt Minh, defended their convoys in transit, searched for Việt Minh cadres, and built a network of spies and informers.

After the outbreak of national resistance, the French expanded their zone of occupation; military posts began to appear in Bắc Bộ. They became strongholds with a large number of troops, from a platoon to a company; stronger firepower; and more stringent defense works. The garrisoning troops in key positions were all Europeans or Africans. The strongholds were defended by the artillery and when necessary, they were strengthened by additional, rescuing forces. Well aware of the poor equipment of our troops, the French Command's policy was to deploy small forces to support their small military posts, which were responsible for the control of important regions. These small forces divided and encircled our troops. They supported the activity of the French's quisling administrations and of the spies who searched for our revolutionary bases: they captured our cadres and kept the local population under strict control. They also rescued their military posts when attacked by our troops and launched offensives against regions suspected of containing Việt Minh organs, troops, factories, or storage depots.

For the French expeditionary corps, General Valluy's strategic policy was to concentrate big forces to destroy the base region which was being resolutely defended by the Việt Minh and particularly to destroy its leading organs. The use of military posts was another strategic measure of no less importance. It had a decisive effect on land occupation and pacification. The French compared it to "the war of trenches" in World War I.

Transport along communication lines was a major weakness of the French, which we sought to exploit to the utmost. Ambushes, however, were not enough to oblige the enemy to narrow their zone of occupation or for us to enlarge our liberated areas or seize back our human and material resources — the fundamental necessities for our protracted resistance war. Using the tactic of watchtowers and small strongholds, the French hampered our ambushes. In 1948, in Nam Bộ, De Latour increased the number

of watchtowers from 500 to 2000. Along important communication lines, watchtowers were built every kilometer. The troops in one watchtower could see those in another and relay warnings when the guerillas appeared. Their military convoys were escorted by infantry troops and led by armored vehicles. Using these measures, the French stated the number of Việt Minh ambushes in the plain of Nam Bộ had been reduced to less than the number of traffic accidents.

The guerilla warfare we used could narrow the area the enemy controlled but it could not eliminate the military posts, which in turn hindered the further development of guerilla warfare. Thanks to their posts, although the number of troops in them was not large, the French could control important strategic regions — densely populated and rich in natural resources.

After the offensive against Việt Bắc, the number of small military posts increased rapidly. In Cao Bắc Lạng, they increased from 68 in early 1948 to 79 by the middle of the year, with the number of occupying troops rising from 2,500 to 6,900. In the northwest and the northeast, 100 more strongholds were set up: in Inter-zone 3, there were 53 new posts, increasing the number of garrison troops from 12,000 to 25,000. After expanding their zone of occupation in Bắc Bộ, the enemy was shifting to the tactic of "tightening the knot and spilling oil."

At an enlarged conference of the Central Committee which met in mid January 1948, the resolution "To Eliminate the Enemy's Isolated Posts and Oblige Them to Narrow their Zone" was adopted. Along with continued ambushes, military posts were to be destroyed to check the French expeditionary corps' pacification program and attempt to reconquer Việt Nam. The new policy allowed the Việt Minh to recover lost territories with their civilian population, resources, and strategically locations. On the other hand, the French system of small strongholds, especially those located in mountain regions, had exposed a new weakness. These

small strongholds were defended by a small number of troops with limited firepower. They were garrisoned in fixed positions which were almost completely isolated. At night, the Việt Minh could concentrate its forces to wage well-prepared battles, annihilate the enemy in one night, and to pull out before sunrise, without having to cope with the enemy's planes, armored vehicles, or mobile forces. Each small post was, moreover, a storehouse for arms and ammunition, particularly the bullets that the Việt Minh forces needed urgently.

To defeat the enemy's strategy of using military posts, we had to go to extraordinary lengths to achieve victory in the war. At this stage, besides stationary ambushes and mobile ambushes, we concentrated on destroying their small strongholds to foil their strategy and usher in a new phase of the resistance war. This also served as a necessary training drill that increased the capability of our forces to fight the French when they were garrisoned in fortifications. The more the French sank into the defensive, the greater number of military forces they poured into their strongholds; they ranged in size from small to large, with defense forces from platoon, company, battalion, and regiment size to an entrenched camp by the end of the war.

The task of finding a way to defeat the enemy strategy of military posts was entrusted to the main-force battalions of the High Command.

3

In late 1947, when the Việt Bắc campaign was going on, the General Staff began to study how to attack the French's small military posts. It was not easy for the Việt Minh forces to carry this out. We had little experience fighting the enemy when they were garrisoned in their fortifications or of attacking fortresses. Our great weakness was our serious storage of armaments. After

a year of fighting, we had seized a number of weapons and some French equipment but these trophies could not meet the needs of our growing forces. The Inter-zone 10 troops were the best equipped in the army. Still, only 52 percent of combatants in a unit had rifles. The main-force battalions of the High Command had fewer; only 41 percent of their men were provided with rifles. We lacked sufficient rifles, had very few machine guns, especially the sub-machine guns necessary for assaults, and had no explosives at all to break barbed wire.

While we were considering the problem, a "new Vietnamese" fighter — a former Japanese intelligence officer — proposed that with our present level of military equipment, we should use *surprise attacks*. This tactical method consisted of organizing crack companies or battalions equipped with light arms to secretly sneak into enemy camps to annihilate the occupants in hand-to-hand combat. We had gained experience in surprise attacks during the Phai Khắt and Nà Ngần battles before the August 1945 general insurrection. This tactical method suited our level of equipment and the intelligence and bravery of our troops. However, we also needed to take into account cases when a secret surprise attack would not be able to deal with a vigilant enemy in entrenched fortifications. So I gave instructions that along with the study of surprise attacks, we should also study a second tactical method, namely *massive attacks* that would open an entrance into an enemy post with fire power. This would be followed by infantry assaults that would annihilate the garrison troops. However, we had no experience in this type of fighting and our weakness was our feeble fire power.

In the spring and summer of 1948, Battalion 45 of the High Command was given the task of attacking a few small strongholds in the French defense system in the mountains to gain experience. Our attacks against Tu Vũ (18 March 1948), and Phố Chùng (10 June 1948) in Yên Bình Xã were unsuccessful. Fighting the enemy in their fortifications was far different from

ambushing them in the open. The French troops were very experienced in arranging fortifications and disposing defense firepower.

In summer 1948, surprise attacks were successfully performed in a number of places. The destruction of the Cẩm Ly post in Bắc Giang was a fairly typical battle. An independent company disguised as women carrying bricks into the camp suddenly attacked the enemy soldiers. When wrestling with Mulay, Chief of the French post, Company Commander Ngô Ngọc Dương choked him to death even though he was much smaller than his foe. The entire platoon of garrisoning French troops were killed or captured. All their equipment and war materials were also captured, and our troops withdrew safely. After several attacks, all the enemy military posts enhanced their vigilance and strengthened their defenses, making future surprise attacks difficult.

We decided to choose some battalions which had participated in the Việt Bắc campaign to destroy some small strongholds using a combination of surprise and massive attacks. The general staff office directed the implementation of this decision. The chosen battalions had their cadres and manpower supplemented and their equipment strengthened before the experiment began. Early in summer 1948, on a hill near the Phú Minh T-junction (Đại Từ district) in the middle of the base region, a post with bunkers, gun emplacements, and porcupine quill-like fences appeared.

This was the initiative of comrade Vũ Yên. Battalion 11 under his command had been ordered to destroy the Phủ Thông stronghold, which was defended by a company of French legionaries, on Highway 3 leading to Bắc Cạn town. He made several reconnaissance trips to the place with his subordinates, and later had the post built in an exact model of the French camp.

It was the first time a model of an enemy's stronghold was constructed to train troops before going into real battle. This method was later widely applied by all military units.

The Việt Minh soldiers dug trenches, arranged the gun emplacements and porcupine quill-like fences. They then learned the enemy's military post's strong and weak points. After the construction of the "post," officers and men one after another played the role of green forces opposing the "offensive" of red forces. Through repeated training, they learned the difficulties they would meet and what they had to do in the coming battle.

Weapons and ammunitions were always a difficult problem. Although the General Staff had given instructions to concentrate arms for the units that would attack the stronghold, each company had only two or three machine guns. There were not enough sub-machine guns for all section leaders. Half the troops were only equipped with spears for hand-to-hand combat. We did not have enough ammunition to outdo enemy firepower at the moment of assault. To overcome this difficulty, soldiers proposed secretly crawling to the bunker to throw hand grenades over the barricades. To overcome our lack of explosives to destroy the fences, it was proposed that we make foldable bamboo ladders with wattle covering on the backside. These could be flung over the fences to help our combatants climb into the enemy camp. These ladders were used later in offensives against other French strongholds, when the porcupine quill-like fences were replaced by iron pikes, barbed wires, and mine fields.

In the second half of July, Battalion 11 set out. Each combatant tied a red thread around his wrist to show his determination not to withdraw in the face of difficulty and to seize the adversary's camp. The General Staff sent a 75-mm artillery gun from Inter-zone 10 to support the battalion. This was the gun that had sunk enemy boats on the Lô river. After a few minutes of artillery pounding to intimidate the French, our machine guns and rifles accurately hit their gun emplacements and bunkers forcing them to duck behind the crenellations and to fire indiscriminately. At once our soldiers slung their ladders over the fence for the shock troops

to climb into the French camp with their spears. Despite fierce opposition, two assault detachments penetrated the stronghold. After two hours of violent fighting, three fourths of the post and the command quarter had been occupied, but our forces were stopped at the last bunker. They had used up their ammunition and hand grenades. With only spears they could not advance into machine gun fire. As dawn came, battalion commander Vũ Yên ordered his troops to withdraw.

The Phủ Thông battle was part of the Việt Minh troops' activity on Highway 3 from July to September; ambushes, surprise attacks, harassment, and sniping was also carried out. The Phủ Thông post was isolated for three consecutive days and assaulted on the two following nights. Only on the afternoon of July 28 could French forces in Cao Bằng come for rescue.

Recently I came across a French book published in 1992, in which the author described the Phủ Thông battle in detail. The Phủ Thông position was defended by the 102-strong Company 2 of the Third Legion Regiment. At 19:30 hours of 25 July 1948 the camp suddenly came under heavy fire. Mortar, machine gun, 75-mm bullets, and shells paralyzed the defendants. The fence and the bunker in the western side were broken and the defense disposition was rapidly upset. In the first hour, the commander of the post, a captain and his deputy, a lieutenant, were killed. Vietnamese troops uttering assault cries occupied quarters 1, 2, and 3, only quarter 4 was still fighting desperately. Half of the company's troops had been put out of action (14 killed, 33 wounded). "The Việt Minh attacking forces," the author wrote, "included 5-6 battalions with 3,000 combatants!" In fact, the strength of Battalion 11 did not exceed 400 men!

The battle was not completely successful, but it gave us a great deal of experience and new confidence. Had our preparations been more complete, the post would have been destroyed. It should be noted, however, that in a pilot battle, we should have chosen a target

more appropriate for the tactical capability of our troops. Battalion 11 was awarded the title of "Phủ Thông Battalion." It began our army's tradition of attacking French strongholds, and became a famous unit later for attacking other strongholds.

4

Early in 1948, we thought that the French might launch a second offensive against Việt Bắc or attack Thanh Hóa. After Salan requested reinforcements for a new offensive against Việt Bắc in discourteous language, he was replaced in mid-May by Blaizot, a four-star general. The movement of several battalions to Nam Bộ brought the strength of the French expeditionary corps back to what it had been before winter 1947. French reinforcements came in little amount. The High Command determined that France was unlikely to launch a strategic offensive against our great base region in the coming dry season. But it was possible that an attack would be directed against the midland region. To cope with the situation, the High Command decided to establish the midland region war front (War Front 3) under the direct command of Hoàng Văn Thái.

During spring and summer 1948, French activities in North Việt Nam were minimal. The enemy expanded its zone of occupation in the northwest, seizing Nghĩa Đô, Bảo Hà, and Phố Lu. In the plain, they encroached on Văn Điển and Thường Tín, outside Hà Nội. From the end of April to the end of June, they organized two sweeps in Lang Tài district, the guerilla base of Bắc Ninh province, and in Ân Thi district of Hưng Yên province, mobilizing a thousand troops for each operation. At the same time, the enemy also spearheaded to Sơn Tây, then to Xuân Mai, and Hà Đông.

During that time, we strengthened our activities along communication lines. During the first four months of the year, Highway 4 witnessed bloody battles. Ambushes in Lũng Vài, Khuổi Ngọa, Nậm Mười, Bản Na, and Đông Khê succeeded one after

another, destroying hundreds of enemy vehicles. From May to September, the Việt Minh actively fought on Highways 5 and 3. Enemy trains and convoys were overthrown and military posts were attacked in surprise, frequently interrupting transport on railways and by road.

Việt Bắc base region and the surrounding provinces remained relatively calm. Our troops took advantage of this to train.

We decided to take the initiative beginning in autumn by launching offensives against key regions to the enemy's rear, using the main-force battalions of the High Command and the zonal forces.

In the period of waging small-scale mobile battles, besides our ambushes, anti-sweep battles, surprise attacks, and onslaughts on small strongholds, we began to train our troops in how to wage large-scale mobile battles. Unlike campaigns in modern wars which utilized units of army corps size, we organized small campaigns involving a number of battalions or regiments that aimed at French military, political, and economic targets. We used these campaigns to train officers, soldiers, and the people in investigation and intelligence work, battlefield preparation, and how to mobilize forces, organize mobile and command troops, coordinate fighting, care for the wounded, and supply food and ammunition. These campaigns would disturb the enemy's rear, foil their scheme to build a puppet army and quisling administrations at the grassroots level, and undermine their economy.

For this autumn, we had two directions to choose. The enemy had spread their forces widely in the northwest and northeast and exposed their weaknesses. The mountain region was good for training the main-force units of the High Command for our first offensive campaign. After careful discussion, we decided to choose a region deep in the northeast to open the campaign. The French would be surprised because they always considered it a safe region. A guerilla unit of the Chinese Communist Party operated in the Shi

Wan Da Shan region, after being attacked by the Kuomintang and taking refuge in Wei Lei. They were expecting an expansion of the liberated zone by our troops here.

I went to Trại Cau to discuss implementing the High Command's decision with the command of Inter-zone 1.

The previous March, the French had mobilized 1,500 troops for sweeps in Bến Tắm, Thanh Mai in Hồng Quảng. Our guerilla forces stood firm. After remaining to destroy their stores, the enemy withdrew.

From Việt Bắc our troops had to pass through a dense system of enemy strongholds and posts to reach the northeast. The Inter-zone Command suggested using small boats to convey troops at night through the controlled corridor. The local officials promised to overcome all difficulties to fulfill this task. Obviously, the people of the northeast had been waiting a long time for the return of our troops.

The supply of food to the army posed a great problem. Here in the region of the Nùng ethnic group, agricultural land was scarce and food shortages were frequent. Since the beginning of the war, the French had continually swept the area, making food shortages more serious. One of the French sweeps' objectives was to discover and destroy paddy storages and reserves of foodstuffs. In many places food could not be found. If the campaign was prolonged the problem of finding food for the troops would become insoluble. The inter-zone party organization and the resistance committee agreed that the French would be completely surprised if the northeast was attacked. They promised to solve the problem of provisioning the troops throughout the campaign.

A group of armed propagation units and a group of scouts under Regiment 308, a main-force unit of the High Command, set out for the northeast to prepare popular bases and to obtain information on the enemy's situation.

Because of food shortages, the units mobilized for the campaign included only three battalions: two main-force battalions of the High Command and one main-force battalion of Inter-zone 1. The Hồng Quảng regiment, which was divided into independent companies operating in the region, would coordinate fighting with them. Their tactical methods would include onslaughts on enemy posts and ambushes on communication roads. The task of destroying enemy strongholds was entrusted to the main-force battalions of the High Command. To better coordinate with the principal campaign in the northeast, we decided to step up activity on Highway 5 and Highway 3 during the summer. At the same time, we would launch a small-scale campaign in the northwest to mislead the enemy. Later, a French historian would remark that in Autumn 1948, the Việt Minh forces "launched all over Bắc Bộ a series of guerilla battles, the continuity of which rapidly turned them into a real offensive campaign."

5

In mid summer, the Front Command under the High Command moved to the top of the Tam Đảo, an imposing mountain chain separating Việt Bắc from the midland region. Main-force battalions of the High Command were training on both mountainsides of Tam Đảo, a military school operated in the completely destroyed Tam Đảo town.

I visited the troops who were trained to attack a stronghold in the hilly district of Lập Thạch. I was deeply shocked by the poor equipment of our forces. Many companies of shock troops were still armed only with spears, even though all the officers and men were in high spirits. There were no complaints about the dangers or difficulties ahead. On the contrary, they were proud of their assigned task. All the companies wished to be chosen as the principal unit in the coming offensive.

In a shock company of the Lũng Vài battalion, a German deputy section commander with the Vietnamese name Hồ Sĩ Thắng fought with us. Thắng had left his French legion unit to side with us, bringing along a Thompson sub-machine gun. He was very young, with blue eyes, blond hair, and small stature for a European. In battles, he always rushed ahead. He lived frugally with our soldiers, eating rice with salted sesame, drinking grilled-rice water from a bamboo section. I would have liked to ask Thắng about his views on the Việt Minh resistance war and the reason he put up with so much hardship to be with our soldiers. I would have liked to talk with this young man a long time but there was no time, he had to set out for the campaign.

For the first time, our main forces launched an offensive deep inside the enemy's rear. I would have liked to have gone with the troops, but Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee said I should not because there might be complicated military developments in the coming dry season. On 2 September 1948, on Uncle Hồ's instructions, a grand military parade was organized in Đồi Me, Lập Thạch district, to celebrate national day and to encourage people to join the resistance war. We also wanted to draw the enemy's attention to that direction. The population of the surrounding regions flocked to the place in great numbers. The military parade took place on a large, flat area. The rostrum, flags, and slogans were prepared carefully.

On that moonlit autumn night, the main-force battalions of the High Command quietly left Lập Thạch for Bắc Giang. Here they used boats to sneak through the belt of French military posts to penetrate into enemy's rear in the northeast.

6

On the night of October 9, the northeast campaign started.

Two main-force battalions of the High Command simultaneously attacked two enemy posts on Highway 13. The Lũng Vài Battalion,

strengthened by an assault company of the Bình Ca Battalion, attacked An Châu, a sub-region position defended by a company of French troops. Two other companies of the Bình Ca Battalion launched an assault on the Đồng Dương stronghold of the same sub-region. The An Châu battle lasted the whole night. The French garrisoned in two positions; one platoon was atop the hill, two platoons and the post command were at the foot of the hill. Two companies of our shock troops used ladders to craw over the porcupine quill-like fences, annihilating the enemy garrisoned at the foot of the hill including the major sub-region commander. But when our shock troops rushed up the hill, they were stopped by machine-gun fire. The situation repeated what had happened in Phủ Thông. After destroying three heavy machine-guns, two GMC vehicles, an ammunition depot, and a food storage, our forces had to withdraw with certain casualties because morning was dawning.

The Đồng Dương battle was a resounding victory. The platoon of French troops in the post was neatly annihilated in half an hour. Three machine-guns, thirty rifles, and a number of prisoners of war were captured.

The following activities of our troops were limited by food shortage.

One month later, the Lũng Vài Battalion attacked Đồng Khuy post. The reinforced French platoon occupied the hill at three different levels. Having learned from the experience at the An Châu battle, our troops captured the highest level first and then attacked the lower ones. Our firepower was very effective. All the enemy troops were killed or captured, and all their equipment seized.

The northeast campaign ended on 26 December 1948. It had great repercussions because the French considered the northeast to be their safest rear area. They were now obliged to abandon seven positions on their defensive line of the region. Our base area was enlarged. Hundreds of partisans gave up their ranks and

surrendered. The French puppet administration at the commune level was wavering.

We were in urgent need of bayoneted rifles for our troops to use when they rushed into enemy camps, when they lacked submachine guns. The spears disappeared from our soldier's equipment only in 1951, when each shock troop soldier had a rifle. However, through the battles of Phủ Thông, An Châu, Đồng Dương, Đồng Khuy, and more during the Autumn and Winter of 1948, it was apparent that even with limited fighting equipment, the Việt Minh troops were not only able to destroy convoys and ambush rescuing troops, but were also able to destroy strongholds that were defended by a platoon or a company of enemy troops, thereby destroying the French tactic of "small strongholds and small fighting forces." This became even more clear in Spring 1949 during a series of battles in the Thao River war front on Highway 4 where units that had not been completely successful in the battles of Phủ Thông, An Châu, took less than one hour to destroy a stronghold defended by a company of Africans and Europeans.

A month after the start of the northeast campaign, the French began to react. Early in November, the French used naval forces and planes to attack the coastal region of Thanh Hóa. On 7 October 1948, French parachutists were dropped on Việt Trì and Vĩnh Hộ (Vĩnh Yên province). The following day, enemy warships and motor launches landed troops on Việt Trì. From there the French moved into the surrounding areas as far as Tam Nông, Hưng Hóa, and La Phù. However, they remained in these places for only a few days before returning to their point of departure. This was the principal offensive of the French against the liberated zone during the Autumn and Winter of 1948. It was difficult to understand what Blaizot intended to achieve by these operations.

The northeast campaign yielded a great deal of experience. Groups of armed propagation units went in advance to pave the

way. Secret mobile troops advanced into the enemy's rear. Civilian laborers were mobilized in great numbers to serve the campaign. Main-force units, even with their poor equipment, rapidly destroyed French strongholds defended by a platoon or strengthened platoon of enemy troops. If we had been able to overcome some weaknesses and shortcomings, our main-force battalions could have destroyed French strongholds with only a company of garrison troops.

In retrospect, we can see clearly that in 1948 by stepping up guerilla warfare in our enemy's rear and turning it into our frontline, by promoting small mobile battles and the use of mobile ambushes, anti-sweeps, and attacks against enemy posts in isolated regions, the Việt Minh had taken the initiative from the French. And in the Autumn and Winter of 1948, for the first time since the beginning of the war, Việt Minh had secured in Bắc Bộ the initiative on the northeast.

Although our military forces were still weaker than those of the French in many fields, by applying the people's war strategy in all respects we steadily shifted the anti-French resistance war to a new phase.

CHAPTER VII

THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE WAR AND NATION BUILDING

1

The young state of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRVN), after fifteen months of reduced tension, faced a new ordeal — the expansion of the war all over the country.

From a provisional revolutionary government we now had a national government elected by universal suffrage. Early in March 1946, French troops moved to North Việt Nam under the Sino-French agreement, we formed an enlarged coalition resistance government that included pro-Chiang Kai Shek elements not through election. At the end of June, Chiang Kai Shek's troops pulled out of Việt Nam, leaving a vacuum in the government and the National Assembly. Four months later, the National Assembly met to approve the first constitution of the DRVN. We needed to cope with a very critical situation after the occupation of Hải Phòng City by French troops. Only forty days later, the new government had to lead the resistance war that quickly spread over the country. War went hand in hand with destruction, sacrifice, loss, hardship, and disease.

Our difficulties were all the more serious because we were a colonial country with a backward agriculture-based economy. Our people had been suffering from food shortages for a long time; the

enemy was present everywhere and surrounded us on all sides, consequently we did not receive any external help. Cities, towns, our economic infrastructure and transport system, and more had been occupied or destroyed by the enemy.

France had been an imperialist power for a long time and was well experienced in aggressive warfare against smaller and weaker countries. Its war of reconquest against Việt Nam was a multifaceted one, encompassing various fields — military, economic, diplomatic, economic, and financial.

From the beginning, the French envisaged a strategic offensive aimed at destroying the leading organs of the resistance, demolishing our main forces, and organizing a quisling government. Using the power of the mass media and their broad international relations, the French distorted the image of the Việt Minh government, portraying it as the ringleader of "communist" rebels. They sabotaged the economy and finances of Việt Nam. They even staged an economic blockade by occupying our seaports and airfields, taking over customs, and doing their utmost to control important land roads and the frontier. They seized the capital and large cities which were the country's political, cultural, and economic centers. They occupied the coalmines of Hòn Gai, the rubber plantations of Nam Bộ, and expanded their control over the deltas of the Mekong and Red Rivers, the principal granaries of Việt Nam in an effort to starve our people. During their large-scale operations and sweeps, besides searching for our main forces and guerillas and destroying our bases, they burned our food granaries, destroyed crops, and killed the water buffalo and oxen that were Việt Nam's main draught animals. They also flooded liberated zones with luxury goods brought in from the occupied zones in order to manipulate our economy. At the same time, they prevented grain, medicine, and items necessary to defend the nation from being transported into Việt Minh zones.

As soon as they set foot in Việt Nam again, the French attacked us financially. They abolished the 500-piastre bank notes, the Indochinese Bank's largest face-valued notes, plundering a great part of the Vietnamese people's property. Four days before their offensive against Việt Bắc, they announced that all the 100-piastre bank notes were to be changed within a month. Once again they deprived the free-zone populations of their small property. This also made it impossible for us to buy goods from the enemy zone that were necessary for the resistance war.

To prevent the French from rapidly expanding their zone of operation, we destroyed all land roads and railways. We were also obliged to destroy the cities and towns, and a number of economic bases built by the French. Such destruction was necessary to fight a war against an adversary several times stronger, but it also caused us much difficulty. The French offensives aimed at expanding their zone of control led to massive waves of evacuees and migrants. Producers were separated from their workplaces and could not continue their work. Many industries had no outlets for their products. The producers were obliged to give up or to change their profession. These disturbances during the initial phase of the war created a climate of instability for producers and businessmen. Those who had money dared not make investments for fear of the spreading of the war.

Ours is a State by the people and for the people. It must ensure the independence, freedom, and happiness of the people. Our immediate task was to win the resistance war, but the task of national building could not be ignored. The two tasks were intimately related. We tried to simultaneously carry out the resistance war and national construction.

On 26 December 1946, the Government Council met under the chairmanship of President Hồ Chí Minh in Hà Đông town. Besides the members of the government, participants included Bùi Bằng

Đoàn,[65] Tôn Đức Thắng,[66] Reverend Phạm Bá Trực of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, and Phan Anh and Bùi Công Trừng of the Construction Committee.

After listening to reports from the Foreign and Defense Ministries, participants unanimously agreed to see the resistance war to the end in order to recover full independence. In the closed room, in the weak light of an oil lamp, all the participants raised their arms to express the will of the whole nation to support Uncle Hồ's determined struggle: "We will mobilize 20 million of our compatriots to oppose tens of thousands of French colonialists. We will surely win. Even if we have to sacrifice 4 or 8 million people to secure independence for our country, freedom for our people, glory for our ancestors, and happiness for our children, it is better to do that than to bow down to slavery under French rule for ever."

This is the same statement Uncle Hồ had written the previous day to send to the whole nation. The meeting lasted until one in the morning. The sky of Hà Nội was a brilliant red from flames and resounded with gunfire.

2

For the first time we had a government elected by the people, yet we faced quite a few administrative difficulties. At the first meeting of the government, on 3 September 1945, President Hồ Chí Minh said: "You and I are all unaccustomed to administrative affairs. We shall learn while working. Shortcomings are, no doubt, unavoidable, but we shall correct them. We have the courage to remedy our shortcomings." He attached great

65. Bùi Bằng Đoàn was a patriotic person and member of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly.
66. Tôn Đức Thắng was later President of the DRVN.

importance to increasing the power and competence of the administration, "to make it powerful, proficient, decisive, unified, and concentrated" and "fully capable of directing the resistance war and building the democratic regime". Consolidating the government at various levels was the constant concern of Uncle Hồ and the Central Committee.

Traveling was difficult during war, but the government managed to hold a national conference on administration and resistance each year. In 1947, it was held in Sơn Tây town where a scorched earth policy was underway. From 1948 onward, the annual conference was held within the safety zone in Việt Bắc. At these conferences, the ministries presented government policies in diplomatic, military, economic, and administrative fields. We discussed the implementation of policies on developing production, the economic struggle with the French, obligatory military service, the mobilization of human and material resources, security and intelligence work, and more. The government also discussed improving administrative mechanisms with the zones and the provinces and improving the working style and relationship between the center and the provinces.

I remember well the resistance and administrative conference which lasted from July 21 to 31 1948. It was held during the rainy season in a narrow room inside a villager's house in Việt Bắc. It was flooded all around, and the conference had to move to another place. Despite this, the 60 conference participants continued their work with diligence and enthusiasm.

The conference listened to a report by Nguyễn Duy Trinh[67] on behalf of Zone 5 and Nam Bộ, and a report by Hồ Tùng Mậu[68] on

67. Nguyễn Duy Trinh was later Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the DRVN.
68. Hồ Tùng Mậu was a revolutionary veteran who sacrificed himself in the anti-French resistance war.

the situation of Zone 4. These were very good reports, summarizing a lot of experience in building local administration through 1000 days of the resistance war. They contained many useful and interesting documents. We were also aware that the organization of the administration system from the center to the grassroots level still revealed many irrationalities.

As secretary of the Party Organization in the government, I was designated by Uncle Hồ to deliver the closing speech. The conference lasted several days and despite many minor shortcomings, yielded good results. On behalf of the participants, I promised Uncle Hồ that all the government's orders and instructions would be duly implemented.

Uncle Hồ attached great importance to teaching revolutionary ethics to the administrative cadres of various levels. He constantly said: "Cadres and Party members must be thrifty, hard working, honest, righteous, and put public affairs above individual interests." Early in 1947, he wrote to the Party members of Bắc Bộ and Trung Bộ to recommend correcting faults that were common among administrative cadres of the time, namely, departmentalism, factionalism, narrow-mindedness, bureaucracy, militarism, formalism, alienation from the people, lack of discipline, egotism, and corruption. By the end of the year, he had written the book *Improvement of Working Style* under the pen name X.Y.Z. This was a very useful book which became bedside reading for many people. Many high-ranking officials of the government guessed that the book was Uncle Hồ's because of the writing style, no one could imagine how under wartime conditions when government offices made frequent moves, he could spare the time to write such a work to educate the people.

Uncle Hồ's daily life was an example for everyone. Living near him for many years, both under difficult conditions and in the capital city, I never heard him complain about heat or cold. Probably, he was always aware of what he had taught his military

officers: "When soldiers still have nothing to eat, officers must not complain of hunger; when soldiers do not have enough clothes, officers must not complain of being cold; when soldiers are not yet accommodated, officers must not complain of being tired."

After leaving Hà Nội, while moving to Việt Bắc or once settled in the base region, the government maintained the monthly meetings of the Government Council. Some months it met twice, always under the direction of Uncle Hồ. The meetings were held in the houses of villagers, but later, a separate conference hall made of bamboo and roofed with palm leaves was built. It was comfortable and imposing. Uncle Hồ often lived far away from the venue of the conference. He had to travel up and down hills and across dales for tens of kilometers, but he never arrived late. Once he caught a fever on his way and had to be carried in a hammock in order to be on time. To maintain secrecy, he often appeared suddenly in disguise: now as a peasant from the plains, then as an old man from the mountains. The disguises were so cleverly done that even acquaintances could hardly recognize him.

The affairs of the resistance were numerous and complicated. Government offices were scattered in many places. Therefore government meetings generally took several days, sometimes lasting until two or three in the morning. Generally, before the meeting of the Government Council, I exchanged views with Trường Chinh and consulted with the Standing Committee of the Central Committee. The Party group met beforehand to reach unanimity and to draft the agenda. When I had to go to the front, Lê Văn Hiến replaced me and presided over these meetings. After the Party group meeting came that of the Việt Minh group which was considered the core of the Government Council. Because of careful preparations, agreement was easily reached and the issues raised were rapidly settled.

One formality which left a deep impression on me was the oath swearing ceremony. Each newly-appointed minister or vice minister of the Government Council took an oath before attending the

meeting of the Council. The ceremony was simple but solemn. Every participant witnessed the pledges of the new members of the Government Council to devote all their intelligence and energy to the country and the people.

The Government Council meeting on 30 April 1949 caused deep emotions. For the first time, the DRVN government met in the forest of the safe base region; it also commemorated two members of the Government Council: Mr. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng who had just died in Central Việt Nam and Hoàng Hữu Nam who had drowned in the Lô River. Both the Minister and Vice-minister of Home Affairs had been lost at the same time. Hoàng Hữu Nam was a promising cadre. He cooperated efficiently with me when I was Minister of Home Affairs. We observed a minute of silence in a house on stilts. Uncle Hồ's eyes were full of tears as he spoke briefly about the life and achievements of the deceased. His tone was painful as if he had lost an elder brother and a son at the same time. The Government Council unanimously decided to appoint Uncle Tôn and comrade Trần Duy Hưng respectively Minister and Vice-minister of Home Affairs.

The Government Council meetings of that time were very pleasant. The participants came from various places and different kinds of works on the front lines. There were occasions for talking about the situation, work, and familial affairs. On New Year's Day or holidays, government meetings ended with a festival of home-made performances, chaired by Uncle Hồ. The ministers made their contributions: *chèo* opera, the recital of poems, or story telling. Phan Anh would imitate the verses of Kim Vân Kiều; Lê Văn Hiến was often requested by Uncle Hồ to sing *tuồng* opera.

The unity of the Vietnamese people, the great national united front of Vietnam became more and more consolidated to foil the enemy's plans to divide the nation by region (North, Central, and South), by religion and by wealth. Uncle Hồ often reminded cadres to avoid "narrow-mindedness", particularly directed towards the rich and the powerful, the intellectuals and famous, and "to create

an atmosphere of confidence, cordiality, sincere solidarity, sharing hardship and glory, joys and woes with one another."

Besides consolidating the national front and the administration, Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee attached great importance to building the Party. At the moment of the general insurrection in August 1945, the number of Party members was small enough to be counted. To meet the requirements of leadership in the various branches and levels, from the center to localities on the periphery, particularly in the armed forces, the Standing Central Committee on 1 June 1948 issued instructions on using emulation to build the Party. People to be admitted to the Party were to be good cadres or combatants already trained and tested in the resistance war. In 1948 and 1949, the CPV's membership increased by half a million. The emulation campaign brought fruitful results but could not avoid certain weaknesses and shortcomings.

On 19 August 1948, the Supreme Council of National Defense was set up to study plans for multi-sided resistance which were to be approved by the government for its implementation. Uncle Hồ was the Chairman of the Council, Lê Văn Hiến its Vice-chairman, and some others and I were members of the Council. Thanks to the Council, the activities of all the branches in the resistance war were coordinated and planned effectively. Uncle Hồ's tasks were all the heavier.

After a few years of resistance, the new regime had been consolidated. Việt Nam had built a democratic state of the people and for the people, a broad and solid bloc of national unity, and a cultural and wholesome lifestyle which helped the armed forces fulfill their duties. Nevertheless, after the failure of the offensive against Việt Bắc, a French officer explained at a press conference in Hà Nội that there was no Việt Minh government. The French always wrongly believed that we only had makeshift huts and ministers with rucksacks on their shoulders and documents in bags, ready to run into the forest whenever French troops appeared. This was not entirely wrong. However, an important

point which he did not understand was that, in these huts with such ministers as he described, the important decisions of the Vietnamese State were being taken to smash the French expeditionary corps later on.

3

The economy constituted an important part of the Vietnamese people's multi-sided resistance war. In its meetings, besides military and diplomatic matters, the Government Council also discussed economic and financial matters, internal and foreign trade, and building and consolidating the rear area.

The Central Committee persistently pursued the goal of creating a second base region in Hoan Diễn[69] besides Việt Bắc, our principal base. Such competent and prestigious cadres as Đặng Thai Mai, Tố Hữu, and Đặng Việt Châu were dispatched there. Since the beginning of the resistance war, Uncle Hồ visited Thanh Hóa six times. He also wrote six letters to assign tasks and thirteen commendation letters.

Having a solid base is a fundamental factor in victory. Việt Nam is narrow, and it is impossible to build an immense base region as in China. The Central Committee of the CPV built bases of appropriate size in strategic parts of the country, taking into account military, political, economic, and cultural considerations. It also attached importance to building guerilla bases in the enemy's rear. The most solid base lay in the people's heart.

We began the resistance war with a people's democratic economy just emerging. Of the three economic components, State, cooperative, and private, the first two had just come into being. The private

69. Thanh Hóa and Nghệ Tĩnh region.

economy accounted for the majority but it had been much influenced by the war and was blockaded and encircled by the French. The enemy imposed an economic blockade, so we applied a policy of self-sufficiency and self-supply in each province throughout the country in order to mount a long-term resistance war. We assisted private production because this was the largest and the most influential economic sector at that time. Having no manufacturing industry, we developed handicrafts to take advantage of local raw materials and meet our fighting, production, and subsistence needs.

War conditions required dispersion and destruction, but in the rear, we encouraged the opening of markets, the repairing of roads, and the development of transport in order to distribute raw materials and products and stimulate production.

Food production was given top priority. Uncle Hồ appealed:

"Fields and milpas are battlefields

Hoes and ploughs are arms

Farmers make up combatants,

The rear areas emulate the front lines."

Government land reforms including reducing rents and loan interest rates, provisionally distributing to the poor lands owned by absent owners, and giving loans to the peasants for production gave enthusiasm to the majority of peasants in liberated zones.

The government also saw to the repairing of dykes, the building of irrigational works, and the popularization of intensive farming methods (primarily involving questions of water, fertilizer, industriousness, and choice of seeds), thereby ensuring stabilized production and high output. All the people were encouraged to increase production of food and clothing. Self-sufficiency committees were set up everywhere. Army units, government offices, schools, and factories allocated time for food production to partially solve their own food problems and to reduce the

contribution of the people. Immense expanses of cassava were cultivated on mountain slopes. Sugarcane and corn completely covered the riversides flood plains in many places. The terraced fields tended by soldiers and workers spread out beside those of the local population. As a result, although agricultural lands were reduced by the war and cut into small plots, food production did not decrease. Serious famine did not occur in any place in the liberated zone. The living conditions of the poor became improved compared to the pre-revolution period.

We encouraged the cultivation of cotton and sericulture. The crafts of thread making and manual weaving were restored and developed, partly solving the clothing question. In 1949, Inter-zone 4[70] alone produced 12,812,000 meters of cloth. Inter-zone 5[71] met its own demand for clothing. The fine and durable military uniforms produced gave pride to the people.

The enemy attempted to undermine the industrial and handicraft bases of the Việt Minh, but our policy was to carry out small-scale, scattered production. Small-scale production was not only easier to protect from bombing raids but also more appropriate for mobilizing the people's capital at that time. We gradually expanded the bases of the State economy and created the first foundations of the cooperative economy.

During the first days of the resistance war, the government held meetings with intellectuals and engineers in Vân Đình to discuss the development of national industry. Everybody was enthusiastic about participating in building up the rear areas. Later, a number of these people were recruited for arms production, and greatly contributed to the production of weaponry for the army. Along with

70. Including Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên Huế provinces.

71. Including Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận provinces.

the big leap forward of the national defense industry, other industries also contributed to our national defense needs and those of the people by replacing imported goods. During the first three years of the resistance war, we extracted over twenty thousand tons of coal, 6,000 tons of phosphate, and 300 tons of saltpeter. We produced a number of basic chemicals, including acids, sodium, and 90°al cohol, and small-scale metallurgy was raised for study. Many handicraft industries were restored: salt production, textiles, sugar and molasses production. Paper production took place all over the country: 553 paper mills churned out 1,587 tons of paper in 1949. Each locality, depending on its specific raw materials, developed goods to exchange at regional markets. The circulation of goods grew daily.

Along with the building of a self-sufficient economy, we also built an independent financial system. Issuing Vietnamese banknotes eliminated the influence of the currency controlled by the French. With caution and cleverness, the Việt Minh had step by step brought to existence the first bank notes of Việt Nam. On 2 February 1946, they were circulated in almost all provinces of South Central Việt Nam below the 16th parallel southward. On 3 November 1946, to undermine the French scheme of monetary manipulation, the government promulgated a decree on the circulation of Vietnamese bank notes throughout the country. In April 1948, less than a year and a half later, the Government Council decreed that from May 22, Indochinese banknotes were to be replaced by Vietnamese banknotes, thereby cutting off the last monetary ties to the French colonialists.

The cadres and workers in the finance sector made great efforts to ensure a supply of paper money sufficient to meet the needs of the resistance war even though they had little to work with. Sometimes production was stopped for months because of damaged machines or shortage of materials. One face of the 500-*đồng* bank notes was printed after the stock of bichromate ammonium was exhausted and

unavailable in the enemy-occupied area. More was ordered from Hong Kong but it was not known when it would be received. The director of the printing mill had to ask for the assistance of military technicians from the Defense Ministry to prepare the chemical.

After three years of resistance, despite the partition of the battlefields, our monetary system remained unified. At first we thought that the localities might issue their own currencies in accordance with local demand. But this measure would have led to the existence of different bank notes with different values and fortunately, it was rejected. Throughout the country, only one kind of bank note issued by the central government was circulated, except in Zone 5 which had an extra kind of bond. Without the guarantee of a gold reserve or strong currencies, the Vietnamese *đồng* preserved its relative stability thanks to the people's patriotism and confidence in the outcome of the resistance war. It was a great success.

Not counting the bombing and strafing by enemy planes, the Việt Bắc base region had two quiet years. After the French withdrawal from Bắc Cạn, the base region was no longer threatened. Along arterial roads, shops mushroomed and commerce became active again. But because the French expanded their occupation of the plains and the middle region, our food shortages became all the more serious. The troops did not have enough to eat. Meals at government offices were a mixture of rice and cassava. As the French strictly controlled the trade of grain, the price of rice skyrocketed and the Vietnamese *đồng* began to lose its value. Besides their blockade on food grains, the French launched a direct attack against the Vietnamese *đồng* by printing false bank notes which they poured into the liberated zone. They also bombed places suspected to be Finance Ministry printing mills. In 1949 the bases of the Finance Ministry were bombed twice.

To overcome this difficulty, the Finance Ministry made two proposals which were debated by the Government Council. Firstly, taxes would be collected on paddy (i.e. in produce) and secondly,

resistance bonds would be issued. If taxes were levied in paddy, we would have enough food to supply the troops and government servants, reducing the serious food shortage at that moment. This measure would also contribute to stabilizing the Vietnamese currency which we did not want, nor did we have the capacity, to print in large quantities. But we also had to consider our transportation capabilities, storage facilities, preservation conditions, and the vulnerability of transport under conditions of war. If we issued 500 Vietnamese *đồng* notes, it would provide us with the reserve funds we greatly needed and it was appropriate to our limited printing capacity. However, when our currencies were depreciating, circulating bank notes with a large face value could make matters worse. Such a bank note would be difficult to use. Moreover, the enemy would undoubtedly take the opportunity to undermine our currency by printing more false bank notes. In the end, we decided to levy taxes in kind and to issue the 500-*đồng* bank notes, after taking actions to prevent sabotage.

The French's scheme "to wage war to feed war" met with great difficulties. Along with the scorched earth policy, we encircled the enemy economy and prevented the introduction of their goods, particularly the luxury goods, into our free zone. At the same time, we bought necessary goods from the enemy-occupied zone. Now and then, our blockade of the enemy economy was too tight, causing negative consequences for our side and the government had to make adjustments. In general, an amended policy on the blockade of the enemy economy was necessary, and places of prosperous commercial activity such as Cống Thần and Chợ Đại gradually took shape.

The French plan for economic rehabilitation in Indochina also failed. They were unable to occupy and restore the industrial and economic potential of important economic regions. The quadrilateral area of Lạng Sơn, Móng Cái, Hà Nội, and Hải Phòng; the Central Highlands; and the territory from Cam Ranh to Nam Bộ did not

experience a moment without fighting. The workers in enemy-occupied regions developed a strong resistance movement. They organized strikes, secretly sabotaged machinery and materials, and caused great losses to the enemy. The production of coal and rubber did not reach targets and exports declined. From 1949 onward, after the adoption of a common plan by the Defense Ministry, the High Command, and the Việt Nam General Confederation of Labor, the sabotage of the enemy economy deepened.

In brief, the difficulties faced by the Việt Minh were incurred on the way to victory; those faced by the enemy were difficulties met on their decline and were impossible to overcome.

4

At the first meeting of the Government Council on 3 September 1945, President Hồ Chí Minh said: "Ignorance is one of the wicked means used by the French colonialists to dominate our people. Over 95 percent of our population is illiterate... An ignorant people is a weak people." Decree No 20/SL of the DRVN government decreed that every citizen learn the *quốc ngữ* (Romanized script) free of charge. It regulated that within one year, every citizen above eight years of age must know how to read and write *quốc ngữ*. After the resistance war began, some people believed that learning was not as urgent as fighting the enemy; it would not be too late to learn after victory. The CPV rectified this view early on. The Popular Education Department created the motto: "To go to school is to join the resistance" or "The resistance is successful, if we go to school." On 1 August 1948, the Department launched a campaign to combat ignorance and to mobilize all efforts to eliminate illiteracy. By mid-1949, over 10 million people had become literate, including populations in the plains, the mountainous areas, the ethnic minorities, and the Catholic areas, even those in the enemy's rear. Hà Tĩnh, Thái Bình, Hà Nam, Ninh Bình, Hưng Yên, Phúc Yên, Quảng Ngãi, Phú Yên, and Bình Định provinces declared that they

had fundamentally eliminated illiteracy. Hà Tĩnh led the movement and was praised by Uncle Hồ.

As early as 1947, the Ministry of Education restored and opened new several general education schools. It convened conferences to review school curricula, consider educational reforms, and reorganize the system of schools to meet the requirements and conditions of the resistance. From Inter-zone 5 north, there were a large number of primary and secondary schools. By 1949, there was a Medical College and foundation courses in literature and mathematics. The army was always grateful to the Medical College, especially to Hồ Đắc Di, Tôn Thất Tùng, Phạm Ngọc Thạch, Đặng Văn Ngữ[72] and others, who helped trained the army's contingent of medics, physicians and pharmacists. We also remember the achievements of the education sector which supplied the army with highly qualified youths who helped shape the technical military units when our troops began to wage large-scale battles.

The war brought a great number of resistants to the midland and mountain regions that had been isolated, and previously considered to be "full of maleficent ghosts and unwholesome water". Food was difficult to find and medicine was almost non-existent. Moreover, the people's way of life in many regions was still backward. The resistance government and its specialized sectors went to great effort to take care of the people's health. Under the guiding principle "prevention of diseases is primordial," a hygiene campaign was launched including "clean food, clean water, clean dwelling." The movement spread to many localities. Much attention was paid to the treatment of diseases, the training of medical workers, the production of medicine, and the building of medical bases. Each inter-zone had a healthcare system from the provincial to commune levels. In the army, the medical system extended down

72. French educaded professors and doctors who joined the resistance from the beginning.

to the platoon level. In 1950, the civil health care service of inter-zone Việt Bắc had 17 hospitals, a surgical ward, 135 first-aid stations, 77 maternity wards and 173 dispensaries. At the commune level, it had 128 pharmacies and 224 hygiene workers. This system partly satisfied the people's demand for disease treatment. Using only simple instruments and materials available on the spot, Dr. Đặng Văn Ngữ successfully produced a simple form of penicillin. Dr. Tôn Thất Tùng found new treatment methods for a number of liver and gall bladder diseases. The treatment of diseases by oriental medicine and southern medicinal herbs received great attention and obtained good results.

During the years of the resistance, no epidemics broke out in the liberated zone. We also significantly limited malaria and dysentery in the mountain regions, preventing these diseases from affecting the task of fighting and related activities.

The 1943 cultural platform of the CPV with the "national, scientific, popular" guiding principle encouraged many researchers, writers, and artists to leave their ivory towers to join the revolutionary struggle. The two works by Trường Chinh "*The Resistance Is Bound to Win*" and "*Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,*" published in the first years of the resistance, laid foundations for a new culture of Việt Nam based on the revolutionary war for national liberation. The Party's policy on culture brought Vietnamese culture back to its national origin and helped oppose idealist, superstitious, or backward tendencies; particularly it brought the culture to the majority of the people who constituted the force that would ensure the victory of the revolution. With the new culture, writers and artists would become "fighters on the ideological field"; literature and art would directly contribute to the struggle for independence and freedom. These were fundamental changes as compared with the pre-revolution culture in past colonial and feudal society.

With extremely limited facilities, murals, lithographic papers, magazines, stories with a small print-runs on bamboo paper, hand

written and orally-diffused pieces of music, the resistance culture was present in all parts of the country. Everywhere, there were festivals, dances, and songs. Choral singing resounded in every nook and cranny. This resistance culture met the sentimental needs of the army and the people during war. The people loved, took care of, and protected the troops like their children. Fighters in the front lines remembered people in rear areas. People, whether they lived in the plain or in the mountains, considered one another to be members of the same family. Culture, literature, and other arts of the resistance made great contributions throughout the thirty years of war.

In 1948, I happened to meet my former teacher, Mr. Võ Liêm Sơn. In the 1920s he had taught at Huế National School. In 1927, I participated in the general strike of Huế students. Thereafter some friends and I went to Đà Nẵng and Quy Nhơn to find ways to go abroad. Returning to Huế, I found it difficult to find a place to live because of the city authorities' excessive attention. It was my teacher Võ Liêm Sơn who told me to come and live at his house, where I read my first book on Marxism. Mr. Võ Liêm Sơn called on the High Command after attending the National Conference on Culture. I was deeply moved when I met him after twenty years of separation. My teacher stood quietly looking at me for a moment, then he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. I had been a poor student, supported by him. He also helped me understand more about the revolution. I knew that his tears on that day were those of happiness.

5

Production for national defense was the primary concern of the young State under the French imperialist siege. Only thirteen days after the declaration of independence, Uncle Hồ decided to set up the first arms-procurement organization assigned with the tasks of collecting and purchasing weapons and establishing bases for arms production.

On 25 September 1945, in my capacity as Defense Minister and on the order of Uncle Hồ, I signed the paper giving authority to comrade Nguyễn Ngọc Xuân to requisition factories and materials necessary to produce arms and to consolidate our national defense.

Considering our backward agriculture-based economy, the absence of manufacturing industry, and war devastation, we had yet to build up the material basis for arms production. Therefore when the government asked for the views of senior intellectuals on this matter, many of them thought that it was impossible. Being encircled on all sides, however, it was imperative to overcome all difficulties and to produce as many weapons as possible for the army and people.

Many working teams were set up to repair and produce arms in the military units of Nam Bộ and in the military factories of the provinces and zones from North to South. Machines and materials came from the small civilian industrial bases. The core labor force comprised workers from the industrial bases, students from technical schools, and patriotic intellectuals. They did everything, from the filling of powder into bullets, the repairing of arms, the making of daggers and scimitars, to the production of hand grenades, mines, and flintlocks.

When the war broke out all over the country, I instructed the arms production industry to organize small arsenals, under the guiding principle: "small-scale, mobile, flexible, and easy to move when necessary" which was suitable to wartime conditions. To implement a people's war and arm the whole people, rudimentary, commonly-used weapons had to be produced, particularly hand grenades and mines for guerilla warfare. These simple arms could be mass-produced and supplied in a timely fashion to various battlefields.

The task of arms production was mentioned at all military conferences and resolutions of the Central Committee. I still

remember the third military conference held in Trúc Sơn, Chương Mỹ district, Hà Đông province, when the production of arms was hotly discussed. The conference paid much attention to acquiring a weapon capable of effectively opposing enemy tanks and armored vehicles. I invited comrade Trần Đại Nghĩa, who Uncle Hồ had just appointed Head of the Arms Production Department, to address the conference. Trần Đại Nghĩa was a Vietnamese intellectual residing in France who had accompanied Uncle Hồ back to Việt Nam to participate in the resistance war. It was he who brought to our young scientists the basic knowledge of the theory and technology of arms production. He informed us that he was directing a group of cadres in experimental tests to perfect bazooka shells in the shortest time possible. This was a task that had been envisaged before. In the visit to the arm production workshop in Giang Tiên, Thái Nguyên in March 1946, I had asked the workshop to produce bazooka guns and shells modeled after the United States gun parachuted to the Việt Minh in Tân Trào, before the general insurrection. In Việt Nam, our arm producers had turned out the gun but they could not yet produce the shell. Just back from France, Mr. Nghĩa took up the study of bazooka shells, making calculations using available materials to replace United States ingredients.

On 5 March 1947, home-made bazookas for the first time destroyed enemy tanks, contributing to breaking the enemy sweep operation in the Chương Mỹ - Quốc Oai region. I learned later that Mr. Nghĩa and his group continued to study before finally perfecting bazookas and shells for the troops' equipment.

In Nam Bộ there was no way to produce bazookas, so engineer Lê Tâm created the bazoo-mine (a kind of concave mine) to be used against enemy vehicles. Bazoo-mines were very effective in the La Ngà battle as well as in the destruction of enemy watchtowers. Later SS guns and shells of different types were created. SS guns applied the recoilless principle, had a simple structure, and did not need much gun powder.

The orientation of arms production was defined in the resolution of the 4th Plenum of the Party Central Committee in April 1947: "It is important to create anti-tank and anti-motor-launch weapons (bazookas, land mines, etc.) and rudimentary weapons such as hand grenades and flintlocks; the tendency to disregard rudimentary weapons and to value only "modern" weapons must be opposed; the inclination to produce rudimentary weapons and not to pay attention to producing and learning the use of "modern" weapons must also be opposed. The method to produce hand grenades and flintlocks must be widely diffused for the people to apply and to arm themselves."

Along with the push to produce hand grenades and mines using increasingly improved techniques during 1947 — the first year of the resistance — we also successfully produced anti-tank weapons such as bazookas, guns, and ballistic shells (e.g., mortars and grenade throwers). In 1948, in Bắc Cạn, before the national conference on arms production, I attended the experimental firing of 187-mm mortars. The barrel was made of oxygen containers, the shell weighed 30 kg and the range was 2 km. Initial results revealed that the dispersion was too great and that further work was necessary to perfect it. Later, 187-mm mortars became part of the regular equipment of infantry units.

One of the great successes in arms production was the creation of the SKZ 60 recoilless gun. The gun weighed only 26 kg and could be taken apart for easy transport. The SKZ used concave shells weighing 9 kg that were capable of perforating 60 cm thick concrete walls (three times stronger than bazooka shells). Used for the first time during the Lê Hồng Phong I campaign, in the Phố Lu battle, the SKZ 60 proved effective in destroying enemy blockhouses and rapidly became support weapons for infantry units. In his book *Indochinese War*, Lucien Bodart later wrote: "But what created difficulty for us, what perforated 60 cm thick concrete walls were the SKZ shells weighing 8 kg produced by the

Vietnamese in the grottoes of Chi Nê.[73] A few shells sufficed to destroy our watch towers."

Informed of the fighting exploits of the SKZ 60 guns, I called Hoàng Đình Phu, Deputy Director of the Technical Study Division of the Arms Production Department, for a report. He said that the SKZ 60 was based on the principle of the recoilless guns using concave shells of the West. Workers of the Technical Study Division, under the direct guidance of Phu and Trần Đại Nghĩa, had calculated and drawn the design of the gun, without using an existing model. Listening to the report, I recalled my visit to the Technical Study Division in December 1947, in Khe Khao, a high mountain 7 km from Bản Thi. Visiting the Division, I expressed the interest in and regards of the Party Central Committee, the Defense Ministry, and the Central Military Committee, for this first scientific and technical research organ of the army and the country and for the group of young intellectuals that I jokingly called "the students of the *quân giới*." The majority of them had just left school, eagerly responding to the appeal of the fatherland to join the resistance war. In this scientific and technical cradle, many matured to become key scientists and technicians for the army and the State.

In retrospect, we adopted the correct orientation. We concentrated our efforts on stepping up the production of rudimentary weapons like hand grenades and mines in order to equip millions of fighters in the people's war throughout the country. With a backward economy, we had no possibility of producing a rifle that an advanced country had mass-produced hundreds of years before. However, we could turn out modern, smooth-barreled weapons; those which used the jet propelling principle and concave shells (i.e., bazooka, SKZ) were

73. Hòa Bình province

sophisticated weapons at that time. Tactically, this meant we could destroy powerful enemy weapons and defenses: tanks, armored vehicles, and bunkers. We could foil the colonialists' strategy of military posts. To manufacture these weapons, no complicated materials were needed, nor did they require a very high degree of precision. Thus they were suitable for our production level and technological equipment at that time. Another achievement of our arms production industry was to ensure the supply of raw and other essential materials and to apply the appropriate techniques — the primary factors in arms production.

Realizing that sooner or later the French would attack us, the Defense Ministry in early November 1946 secretly ordered the armament department to evacuate our stores and factories from the large cities to the high lands. Several months earlier, in May that year, Uncle Hồ had given instructions to Đặng Văn Cáp to organize an arms factory in Cao Bằng in preparation for the resistance war. About 40,000 tons of machinery, tools, and raw materials were transported from the cities to the countryside and mountains (from Zone 5 north) over a distance of 50 to 500 km between late 1946 and early 1947. It was one of the great achievements of our arms production industry.

The raw materials for arms production came from various sources and required courage, intelligence, and sacrifice on the part of the workers and cadres. Besides the reserves kept in depots, such precious explosives as tolite, melinite, and dynamite were taken from enemy arsenals or extracted from unexploded bombs, guns and mortar shells. This work was very dangerous, calling for courage and sound technique. There were unfortunate accidents, but the workers did not give up. We compensated for the shortage of iron and steel by using materials scattered throughout the country: thousands of kilometers of rails, hundreds of railway engines, wheels and axes, and thousands of tons of scrap iron taken from

broken bridges, rollers, and abandoned vehicles. We made up for the lack of copper through contributions by the people; copper pans, brass trays, incense burners, and old coins were offered to the government for arms production.

The materials bought from enemy-occupied regions, especially from Nam Bộ, also contributed significantly to the maintenance and development of production. In 1948 alone, the trade division of the armament department bought over 27 tons of chlorate calcium, over 10,000 cakes of dynamite, and 120,000 fuses. The armament service of Zone 8, in 1948 and 1949, bought 17 tons of soda, 1.6 tons of various acids, 500 kg of sulfur antimony, and 7 tons of copper sheets. To take the initiative in production, however, our arms production industry organized the manufacture of fuse-powder, black explosives, soda, and fundamental acids in every part of the country. Hundreds of tons of soda were produced in the traditional way using bat excrement from mountain grottoes mixed with kitchen ash collected from hundreds of thousands of families. Fundamental acids and chemicals for the production of explosives, especially mercury fuminates, were produced by hand in workshops, sometimes causing fatal accidents.

I wrote praising the producers of the DAM bullets. Their success, together with the brass casting accomplished by the artisans of Ngũ Xã village (Hà Nội) who used their traditional casting techinques, paved the way for the large-scale production of bullets. Between 1949-1950, about two million DAM bullets were produced under extremely difficult conditions. This fact was extremely important. Another of their outstanding achievements was the manufacture of mortar barrels of various calibers from joined portions of 105 and 155-mm enemy gun shells. Over 20,000 cadres and workers in the arms production industry, including such exemplary men as heros Ngô Gia Khảm and Trần Đại Nghĩa, devoted their revolutionary spirit and creative scientific labor to

turn out a huge quantity of arms and ammunition,[74] thereby contributing to the victory of our protracted resistance war. They also laid a solid foundations for the national defense industry and, to some extent, for the civilian industry of our country.

6

In a meeting of the Standing Central Committee after the victory of Việt Bắc, Uncle Hồ proposed launching a patriotic emulation movement throughout the country in order to accelerate the resistance movement. On March 27, 1948, the Standing Central Committee issued an instruction launching the campaign. Uncle Hồ wrote an appeal to the people in very simple words on the 1000th day of the resistance war:

"What is the objective of the patriotic emulation?

To combat the hunger and hardship pirates

To combat the ignorance pirate

To combat the foreign invaders.

"The way of doing is based on

The strength of the people

The spirit of the people

"In order to

Bring happiness to the people

"The immediate results of the patriotic emulation movement include

74. Between 1948-1950, arsenals from Zone 4 north alone produced over 1 million hand grenades and mines, about 900 guns, and 150,000 bazooka, SKZ and mortar shells, over 200 tons of chemicals and explosives as well as over 2 million rifle and sub-machine gun bullets.

All the people will have enough food and clothes

All the people will know how to read and write

All the men in the army will have enough food and armaments to fight the foreign invaders."

In his poem celebrating the New Year of the Buffalo (Kỷ Sửu, 1949), Uncle Hồ wrote:

"Everybody joins the emulation movement

Every branch joins the emulation movement

They emulate day after day

We will certainly win victory

The enemy will certainly meet with defeat."

The patriotic emulation movement was the result of a great initiative by President Hồ Chí Minh. It had a great influence throughout the 30 years of war. All our army's and people's actions in the two resistance wars were associated with the patriotic emulation movement. Like many other movements, the patriotic emulation movement began with a few simple words spoken, a few simple lines written by Uncle Hồ.

The Government Council on 27 May 1948 after the meeting which decided to mark the 1000th day of the resistance

General Giáp handing the Victory Flag to Vương Thừa Vũ, Commander of Division 308 on its birthday, 28 August 1949

CHAPTER VIII

PREPARATIONS FOR GENERAL COUNTER-OFFENSIVE[75]

1

In 1949, a number of world events and events in Indochina were unfavorable for France. The Chinese revolution had grown in strength. The Chinese liberation forces won big victories in the

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75. According to the 13 June 1988 communiqué of the Institute of Military History, a seminar on the strategic periods of the anti-French war, which included high-ranking military cadres and members of the Politburo during the war, concluded that the anti-French war should be divided into three phases:

Phase 1: From the resistance war of Nam Bộ to after the Việt Bắc victory (Autumn-Winter 1947). This could be called the phase of preservation and development of our forces which also involved checking and decimating enemy forces.

Phase 2: From the victory of Việt Bắc until before the frontier campaign. This was the phase during which the guerilla warfare was developed and the ground work for our counter-offensive was laid.

Phase 3: From the frontier campaign to Winter-Spring 1953-1954, with the apogee being the Điện Biên Phủ campaign. This was the counter-offensive and offensive phase, leading to the liberation of the North and creating favorable conditions for the anti-US resistance war.

The book *Fighting under Siege* reflects the historical realities and is based on the Central Committee's resolutions and policies.

Liushen, Pingxin, and Huaihai campaigns and were preparing to cross the Yang Tse river. In the Huanan region, adjacent to the border with Việt Nam, guerilla warfare had developed fairly strongly and the Chinese there were preparing to welcome the liberation forces and fighting back the Kuomintang troops' violent sweeps. The French colonialists in Indochina and the ruling circles in France were worried by these developments in China.

At the beginning of the year, a Party Standing Central Committee meeting was convened. In the invitation letter, Uncle Hồ recommended that participants think over and be prepared to express their views on how to expedite the resistance war. Important decisions on a number of problems might be made.

Uncle Hồ returned to Châu Tự Do[76] from Điềm Mạc.[77] I crossed the De pass[78] to Tân Trào[79] on horseback. The previous autumn-winter, the Party and Government had led the army and the people in preparations to fight a second French offensive against Việt Bắc, but the enemy had not been able to organize it and our base region had remained calm. The outlook of the resistance was brighter than what it had been two years before. The successive victories of the Chinese revolution also created favorable conditions for us.

After tea, the meeting of the standing Central Committee began, presided over by Uncle Hồ. Trường Chinh reviewed the resistance of the past year. I reported on the military situation with more details. In general, our guerilla warfare had expanded widely to the enemy's rear, making it impossible for the French to concentrate their forces and launch a second offensive against Việt Bắc. They were obliged instead to carry out sweeps to consolidate their rear. We had actually shifted to a new phase and were challenging the French to secure the initiative in Bắc Bộ. Although they had received 30,000 reinforcement troops, bringing their total force at the end of 1948 to

76, 77, 78, 79. Places in Việt Bắc war zone

160,000 troops (with puppet Vietnamese troops accounting for 46 percent), they were still seriously short of troops. This was all the more serious since their forces were spread thin to cope with more and more attacks by our side. The French could not yet set up a puppet administration with Vĩnh Thụy[80] (i.e. Bảo Đại). The big victories of the Chinese revolution were an additional headache for our opponents.

Uncle Hồ expressed his views. After two years of resistance, our strength was better. Our troops had made good progress. The people had confidence in the resistance. Because of our progress, the French were embarrassed. Throughout 1948, they had not been able to launch any significant offensive against the free zone. The increased proportion of puppet forces with their ranks was a potential danger for their internal situation. At their present rate of progress, no doubt the Chinese liberation forces would soon reach our frontier. This would definitely help our resistance war and make conditions more favorable for us. Should Chinese liberation forces fail in continental China, however, the US and the UK would increase their war efforts in order to keep Indochina, creating great difficulties for us. Uncle Hồ proposed that we plan our next actions which might consist of remaining actively on the defensive and making thorough preparations for a general counter-offensive.

The Central Standing Committee discussed our options very carefully. Two opinions emerged. The first thought we should maintain an active defense and prepare for a general counter-offensive. The second believed that, in view of the balance of forces between ourselves and the French and the unequal development of battlefields, we should concentrate our forces for a counter-offensive in Bắc Bộ, while striving to keep the enemy in check in other regions. Uncle Hồ sided with the first position, concluding: "We should pose

80. The last emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945)

the task of being actively on the defensive and preparing for a general counter-offensive in order to stimulate the utmost efforts of all the army and people. We should also be prepared to capitalize on any favorable conditions when new opportunities arise."

The Central Standing Committee decided to convene a sixth conference of central-level cadres.[81] Trường Chinh was to prepare the political report and I had to draft the military report to be delivered at the conference. Time was pressing, and the new task was extremely important. I rode back at once to the High Command. There I invited Văn Tiến Dũng, Hoàng Văn Thái and a number of key cadres to my office to inform them of the content of the Standing Central Committee conference and to prepare the military report.

Afterwards, I went to the government offices in Thanh La, Châu Tự Do, for a meeting of the Party organization in the government. It took place in a thick bamboo forest which the sun hardly penetrated, and it had been bitter cold for the past few days. All the participants came, including eldest brother Sao Đỏ (Nguyễn Lương Bằng's nickname), representative of the Central Committee, and Lê Văn Hiến, Finance Minister and Deputy Secretary of the Party organization. Hiến was sick with malaria and very tired but determined to come. The conference should have begun in the afternoon, but some comrades from far away arrived late, so it started after dinner. I reported on the international and internal situation and discussed the new tasks as defined by the conference of the Standing Central Committee. Long discussions took place and halted only at midnight.

The conference continued for two days more and in the end, unanimously agreed on the central committee's assessment of the situation in the world and at home as well as on our new task. The conference reviewed what the Government had done in 1948,

81. Of the Communist Party of Việt Nam

discussing each ministry. Then it discussed our program of action for 1949. Lê Văn Hiến told me privately: "The Defense Ministry had just sent its estimation of defense spending for consideration. The estimation is in accordance with the new plan, amounting to a huge sum. The financial situation is difficult because of the enemy's economic blockade." I informed him that Tạ Quang Bửu and I had carefully considered our needs and greatly reduced our spending request, that it was the minimal figure. I asked him to make the necessary arrangements. Lê Văn Hiến nodded and said: "Don't worry. In any case, your request will be met, but you should tell your men to be thrifty."

The final meeting lasted until 3.00 a.m. There were more heated debates. After two days and three consecutive nights of work, however, every participant was tired. We were enthusiastic because of the development of the resistance, but at the same time we were concerned by the new task which we could see was very great. The next morning, some responsible comrades set out for the meeting of the Việt Minh group and members of the Democratic Party, before the meeting of the Government Council.

2

The sixth conference of Party's central-level cadres was held from January 14 to 18. On the morning of January 14, the delegates arrived at the conference's venue. Besides representatives from localities and branches, delegates of inter-zones 3 and 4 were also present, although the travel had been difficult and dangerous. The conference hall was made from bamboo and palm leaves but it was spacious; there was room for a full session as well as group meetings. A generator produced electric light and there were yellow-starred red flags and hammer-and-sickle flags, pictures of Uncle Hồ, Comrade Stalin and Comrade Mao Tse-tung, and many mottoes written in yellow letters on a red background.

The conference started at 13:00 hours. After saluting the colors, singing the national anthem and the Internationale *(Quốc tế ca)*, and observing one minute of silence in commemoration of fallen fighters, Uncle Hồ opened the conference. Trường Chinh presented the Political Report, assessing the situation at home and abroad, pointing out new favorable conditions and new difficulties. He also presented the Party's decision to push forward the resistance by active defence and preparing for a general counter-offensive. Because of the heavy agenda, the conference also worked at night. On the first evening, there was an artistic performance but the weather was very cold, and people preferred to sit by the fire rather than attend the festivity.

On the morning of the 15, I presented my report — "Our Military Task in the Current Period." The report had three sections: 1) After the Việt Bắc campaign, the war entered the second phase; 2) How would the second phase evolve?; and 3) Our pressing military tasks. The report pointed out two facts about the new phase. The first fact was that the second phase began with the 1947 victory of Việt Bắc, a victory for us, and a defeat for the enemy. The second fact was that the second phase had barely lasted a year when the international situation changed, due to the economic and financial weakening of France and the big successes of the Chinese revolution. When applying our defensive strategy, it was still necessary to make active preparation for shifting our resistance to a general counter-offensive. We needed to implement the guiding principle of the new phase more actively, at a stronger and quicker tempo, attaching more importance to preparations for a general counter-offensive aimed at securing final victory.

The Financial Report by Lê Văn Hiến followed the Military Report. It clearly laid out what had been done and what needed to be urgently addressed in the new phase.

The conference acclaimed the reports, debated them carefully, and unanimously approved the resolution. The resolution of the

sixth conference of central-level cadres was an important document outlining the resistance's urgent requirements. Our urgent military tasks included: to break the enemy's autumn-winter offensive, to adopt a more advantageous defensive posture, to apply the strategic guiding principle in the new phase and actively prepare for a general counter-offensive, to hit more strongly at the enemy's rear, to attack their strategic positions, to cut off the enemy's major communication lines, to open new offensives against places of strategic importance where the enemy was weak, to take the initiative in a campaign then boldly secure strategic initiative, to actively help the revolution in Laos and Cambodia, to enlarge the Lao-Cambodian war front, and to turn Việt Nam, Laos, and Cambodia into one battlefield.

Our strategic guiding principle was to consider guerilla warfare fundamental and mobile warfare as supplementary. However, it was still necessary for us to speed up mobile warfare and when conditions were right to give mobile warfare an appropriately important position in order to shift the resistance to the counter-offensive phase.[82]

After the conference of central-level cadres, Uncle Hồ convened a meeting of the Government Council for two days at the end of January. Ministers and vice-ministers arrived on the afternoon of the preceding day. On the morning of the 25th, Uncle Hồ exchanged views with us. The Government Council meeting began at 13:00 hours. In his capacity as President of the Republic and Prime Minister of the Government, Uncle Hồ reported on the situation at home and abroad and the tasks for 1949. In the evening, around a bonfire, a commemorative ceremony was

82. Later in 1951, when General De Tassigni built a defense line of bunkers around the plain of Bắc Bộ, a foreign comrade proposed to the Central Committee of our Party that we return to guerilla mobile warfare. After consideration, we maintained our agreed upon guiding principle.

organized for Reverend Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, an adviser of the Government. The subject of national cohesion was repeated several times during the ceremony.

The next day, the ministries each reported on their respective activities in 1948 and pointed out the main items in their 1949 program of action. Many important problems were settled. On the evening of the 26th, a small banquet was held before the departure of the Nam Bộ delegation to celebrate *Tết* for the Government. The banquet was moving; after dinner, around the bonfire many artistic performances were organized. A play depicting the day of victory was performed, in which Uncle Hồ talked to the people of Nam Bộ in Sài Gòn (present-day Hồ Chí Minh City) over loudspeakers. The laughter was resounding; Uncle Hồ laughed so heartily tears came.

After the meeting of the Government Council, Uncle Hồ convened the Supreme Council of National Defense for a one-day meeting. The Council solved many important questions relating to secret military matters. Uncle Hồ left in the afternoon, while the rest of us continued to work until nightfall. On the initiative of Uncle Hồ in early February, the Standing Central Committee issued the Instruction to boost the patriotic emulation movement to adopt a more active defensive and prepare for a general counter-offensive. On April 30, on the occasion of the International Labor Day, Uncle Hồ wrote the article *Principal Tasks in the New Phase*, pointing out ten practical tasks in the military, political, economic, and cultural fields that military men, scholars, peasants, workers, businessmen, the whole nation, could take to step up active resistance and begin intensive preparation for a general counter-offensive.

3

In mid-January, in my capacity as commander-in-chief and general political commissar, I convened a conference of high-ranking military and political cadres to explain the resolution of the

sixth conference of central-level cadres, discuss military tasks, and debate the strategic guiding principle and our operational plans. I presented the military plan for 1949, which was primarily aimed at our enemy's weakest places, and which would have a great strategic effect on our side. A number of offensive campaigns were planned to destroy the enemy's main strength, to destroy their puppet forces, to narrow their area of occupation, and to secure the initiative in parts of the front. In the principal battlefield of Bắc Bộ, our tactical targets were Cao-Bắc-Lạng[83] and the northwest; we also intended to eliminate the enemy's pressure on the rear of Inter-zone 3, in Hòa Bình. In Inter-zone 5, the main target was Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), especially its northern area. In Nam Bộ the principal targets were the Long Châu Sa region and the Tiền and Hậu Rivers.

With regard to Laos, Inter-zone 10 was entrusted with the task of helping our friends build and develop a number of guerilla bases in North Laos, and to eventually set up a liberated zone in North Laos. Inter-zone 4 was to help them build bases in Central Laos. Inter-zone 5 was to assist in developing bases in South Laos, with a view to building the Boloven[84] base region in Laos. With regard to Cambodia, the Nam Bộ command was to send more political cadres and armed forces there to help our friends enlarge their bases and guerilla positions, and eventually to join the northeast and the southeast base regions.

To implement our tactical task, policy and plan, I believed that the most important and pressing problem was for us to build up our forces, particularly the main force. I guided the general staff in organizing a conference on the topic which was presided over by Hoàng Văn Thái, chief of the general staff. The conference was to study the organization, structure and equipment of the main-force division of the Ministry and the main-force regiments of the

83. Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn and Lạng Sơn provinces
84. Highlands in Lower Laos

Inter-zones. In Bắc Bộ and Central Việt Nam, each Inter-zone had a main-force regiment. In Nam Bộ, each Inter-zone had a main-force battalion. Each regiment included three infantry battalions and a number of artillery, engineering, communications and transport units. Each battalion had three infantry companies and a supporting company.

Along with the formation of the main-force units, the building of local forces and the militia was also given attention. Acting on our proposal, the Standing Central Committee instructed local Party committees and Party organs in the important position of the local forces and militia in the new phase, revealing some shortcomings of the past, and outlining what was to be done in the coming period. The training of officers and men was vitally important in order to raise the political and military level and tactical capabilities of the troops. I discussed with Hoàng Văn Thái and Văn Tiến Dũng the curriculum of training courses in order to meet our tactical tasks. All units would be trained in using rifles, guns, hand grenades, and bayonets, and in digging fighting trenches.

Tactically, the units involved in mobile battles would be trained in waging surprise attacks, staging ambushes, and fighting parachutists. The units operating in the enemy's rear needed to learn guerilla warfare and anti-sweep tactics. The units attacking enemy posts must learn military reconnaissance, how to dismantle obstacles, destroy blockhouses (big and small), and bunkers (main and satellite), and fight the enemy inside their fortifications. Studying past fighting experiences was of great significance. The fighting experiences of the units on the Cao-Bắc-Lạng and on the north-west war fronts enabled the general staff to develop a number of good training documents on topics like "offensive tactics against an enemy post" and "experience using weapons in coordinated offensives against enemy posts and in battles on land routes or water ways."

The General Staff organized courses on "training officers, rectifying soldiers" for over 200 high-ranking and middle-level

cadres of the Inter-zones, schools, and organizations in Soi Mít, Đại Từ district, Thái Nguyên province. The study program covered such issues as the current situation and tasks, the strategic guiding principle, tactical questions concerning battalions and regiments, battle experiences, and experience in political work. Hoàng Văn Thái, Văn Tiến Dũng, a number of other comrades, and I gave lectures and directed the course.

4

In accordance with the 1949 military plan, the High Command issued orders and instructions to the Inter-zones and war fronts. During the spring and summer, a number of campaigns were opened. In the north-west, Inter-zone 10 launched two waves of activity in the Đà River and Sơn La region, narrowing the area of French occupation, broadening our liberated zone, joining Sơn La to Lai Châu, and expanding to North Laos. In Cao-Bắc-Lạng, with the northeast as the main direction, Inter-zone 1 opened two campaigns: the principal one was in Cao-Bắc-Lạng with a coordinated campaign in the northeast. The Cao-Bắc-Lạng campaign was designed to destroy enemy forces, paralyze Highway 4, and oblige the enemy to withdraw from Bắc Cạn. The coordinated campaign in the northeast was meant to check the enemy and fight back any rescuing troops, while diverting the French's attention from the main campaign.

The northeast campaign opened fire first. A French convoy was ambushed in Điền Xá, and 100 soldiers were killed or captured. Ba Sơn post was also occupied, and Lạng Sơn town was put under pressure. Móng Cái was subjected to a surprise attack during which many frightened puppet soldiers took flight. In the principal direction of Cao-Bắc-Lạng on the night of March 15, Bản Trại, a stronghold defended by a company of Africans and Europeans, was attacked and annihilated.

For several years, the enemy system of military posts had been used for land occupation and pacification. Rescuing units were mobilized to reinforce and to defend the posts when necessary. To speed up the resistance war, our main-force units were given the extremely important task of destroying all enemy strongholds with solid defense works. Before the Bản Trại battle, our attacking unit was instructed to make detailed and careful preparations. I personally supervised these preparations and approved the operational plan. At the end of the campaign, I was given a detailed account by the battalion commander Thái Dũng.

The Bản Trại battle drew on earlier experiences from Phủ Thông, An Châu and other battles. Our fighters soaked cloth with gasoline and put it at the post's fence and set fire to it. This made the area clear for all kinds of guns to aim at the targets. Our guns were positioned very near, and our fighters aimed at each crenel and fired to keep the enemy busy while we rushed through the opened gate. The Bản Trại battle lasted just 37 minutes, and all the garrisoned soldiers were annihilated. As a result, the Bản Trại position was destroyed, the Bản Trại bridge broken, and Highway 4 cut off.

In the meantime, some other French posts were attacked or forced to withdraw. At the end of April, the Bông Lau - Lũng Phầy ambush was fought on Highway 4 and achieved great success. After the campaign I listened to the account of its commander. We knew the pattern of enemy transport: every five days a convoy of over 100 vehicles would leave Lạng Sơn for Cao Bằng. The ambush was staged on the section of road between the Bông Lau and Lũng Phầy posts. When the convoy entered the ambush, our fighters at once assaulted them and fought hand to hand. One part of our artillery opened fire on the surrounding enemy positions to support the forces attacking the convoy. Taken by surprise and frightened, the enemy took flight while fighting back. Over 500 enemy troops, most of them Africans and Europeans, were killed, wounded or captured. Over 50 vehicles

and 500 gasoline barrels were destroyed and hundreds of guns were captured. Then the Bản Phát post on the way from Cao Bằng to Trà Lĩnh was attacked, obliging the French to abandon the Phò Mã and Phò Pheo positions.

Highway 4 became first "a road without joy," then "a road of blood" and later, "a road of death" for the enemy. It was the enemy's only supply road to the northeast and thus, a route of strategic importance. Now it was paralyzed. The French changed their transport pattern frequently and stepped up patrols and searches in dangerous places to defend bridges and to consolidate positions on both sides of the road. However, day or night, enemy convoys could not help avoiding losses. The Moroccan regiment of colonial infantry, having the task of rescuing enemy troops on this dangerous route, suffered heavy losses. Its combatants ironically said: "The regiment was composed of innocents condemned to death."

In this campaign, our troops' ability to attack enemy positions with solid fortifications was markedly improved. Our ambushes on communication roads obtained continuous successes. The enemy had to change the commander of the border region. General Alexandri, commander of the infantry in Indochina, then General Cock, commander of Bắc Bộ, flew from Hà Nội to inspect the battlefield to try to find ways to cope with the situation.

At the end of February, the Party organization in the Government held a meeting. Uncle Hồ arrived on the afternoon of the 28th to exchange views with us. By the morning of March 1, almost all the participants had arrived. To save time, Uncle Hồ proposed that the conference start because we had many pressing problems. After reading the agenda, he said that discussion must first focus on the question of Vĩnh Thụy's (i.e. Bảo Đại) repatriation by the French and on their noisy propaganda to deceive the people. To express our determined position and to prevent the people from being duped by the French, we prepared a document for the people. The Party organization in the

Government met for two days and nights to settle a variety of political, military, economic, and financial problems. The discussion of these agenda items was completed around noon on March 3. The secretariat then typed the document explaining the question of Vĩnh Thụy and sent it to all government organs. The document was brief and comprehensive. It stated:

"Việt Nam: the longer the resistance war lasts, the stronger our forces become. National cohesion becomes all the firmer.

"The French scheme to wage a quick war and to win a rapid victory had failed. The US scheme to help France has also failed.

"China: the revolution triumphed. The world democratic camp became stronger, creating favorable conditions for our resistance war.

"We don't rely on others. So far with our own strength, we have fought and won over the enemy. Final victory will also be decided by our own strength.

"The US: helps reactionary forces and opposes democracy. As a result: in Europe, the Greek reactionaries failed, the Greek people won; in Asia, Chiang Kai Shek's troops suffered bitter defeat, the liberation army won great success.

"France: militarily, after a few years of hostility, is still dithering in a few cities. Politically, its divisive maneuver is a complete failure. Thinh[85] committed suicide. Hoạch[86] ran away, Xuân[87] is dying. Vĩnh Thụy is the French's last card.

"Vĩnh Thụy served the French, then the Japanese for 20 years. Now, he is nurtured by the French and brought back to the country. The French support him. Vĩnh Thụy is using false claims of 'independence and unification' to deceive the people.

85. Lackey of the French colonialists.
86. Lackey of the French colonialists.
87. Lackey of the French colonialists.

"The French control military affairs. They restrict and direct diplomatic matters. Economic and financial affairs depend on France. Vĩnh Thụy has betrayed the country and the people.

"French troops are still trampling our land, plundering and killing our people. They still want to enslave our people.

"Conclusion: Our people are determined not to be deceived. We will resolutely fight and win."

5

In early April, to implement a Standing Central Committee resolution, the High Command[88] ordered that the Thao River campaign in the northwest be prepared. The enemy showed many weaknesses and vulnerable points there. The aims of the campaign were to destroy enemy troops, enlarge the northwest base area, eliminate pressure on Việt Bắc from the west, and consolidate the springboard to North Laos. On the order of the High Command, our troops prepared for the liberation of Bắc Cạn and fighting on Highway 4, heading for the northwest. In the meantime, the French command opened an operation in the direction of Phú Thọ, then Tuyên Quang. This enemy action was aimed at disturbing our rear, pulling our main force back, and enhancing French prestige in view of General Revers' arrival to inspect the troops and Vĩnh Thụy's return to the country.

Within the High Command, there were then two opinions. The first one supported the troops' continued advance to the northwest for the Thao River campaign. The second one advocated the troops' return to Tuyên Quang in order to fight the

88. Under Decree 14/SL dated 12 March 1949 by President Hồ Chí Minh, *Bộ Tổng chỉ huy* (General Command) was re-named the High Command.

enemy there. The responsible comrades and I agreed with the first opinion after weighing the pros and cons. We believed that no matter why the enemy went to Tuyên Quang, they could not remain there long. It was obvious that the battlefield of Highway 4 had created heavy pressure on the enemy. When the Thao River defence line was attacked, surely the French would be more embarrassed. The High Command ordered our troops to step up their advance to the northwest and opened the Thao River campaign as planned. On the other hand, I thought that the enemy operation to Tuyên Quang offered an opportunity to fight the French outside of their fortifications; therefore, I decided to set up the command of the Lô River campaign. Bằng Giang was appointed chief commander, with Vương Thừa Vũ and Lâm Kính as deputy commanders. We quickly deployed six main-force battalions of the High Command and three battalions from Inter-zone 10 to the campaign.

The High Command intended to concentrate our main forces in order to annihilate the enemy by destroying their supply routes by roads, waterways and air way; by developing aggressive guerilla warfare; by quickly concentrating our main forces and mobilizing them in timely fashion to annihilate the enemy as they withdrew. As we expected, the enemy remained in Tuyên Quang for only three weeks. The success of our troops on the Thao River battlefield on May 19 obliged the enemy to pull back hurriedly. We pursued them on both sides of the Lô River, especially on the right bank. Some of our units caught up with the enemy and fought them at Tràng Sảo, Lệ Mỹ, Tiên Du, and Núi Hét.

In that battle, the High Command had correctly foreseen the enemy's intention, made the right decisions, and showed diligence in command. However, it faced quite a few difficulties because it lacked a wireless means of communicating and mobilizing our troops; which was why the "decisive battle" did not take place. From that battle, I realized that many problems

still needed to be settled with regard to the organization, equipment, and command before shifting from small-scale mobile battles to large-scale ones.

When the Lô River campaign was being planned, the Thao River campaign began. Lê Trọng Tấn was appointed chief commander, and Cao Văn Khánh deputy commander. On May 19, two battalions of our forces simultaneously annihilated the Đại Bục and Đại Phác enemy posts, achieving a great success in time to celebrate Uncle Hồ's birthday.

The enemy mobilized their forces from Lao Cai and Phong Thổ to cope with the situation. At the end of June, the command post of Phố Ràng sub-sector and a number of positions on the left bank of the Thao River were annihilated. The Thao River defense line was destroyed along a 30 km long section from Bảo Hà to Bắc Cuông. The liaison line between Bảo Hà and Lao Cai, between Bảo Hà and Nghĩa Đô, was cut off. In mid-July, the Việt Minh attacked and destroyed Dóm post and forced the French to abandon a number of other positions. The Thao River defense line was destroyed along a new 70 km-long portion, from Ba Khe to Bảo Hà.

The Thao River campaign ended successfully. Thirty enemy posts were destroyed or forcibly abandoned. The Thao River defense line was broken in large sections. Our political and military bases in enemy-occupied regions were enlarged. In that campaign, our main-force units made great progress in the offensive tactics they used against enemy strongholds. For the first time, we completely destroyed an enemy sub-sector including positions, large and small, with fairly solid fortifications. After the end of the campaign, I listened to the reports of the commanders of the Đại Bục, Đại Phác, and Phố Ràng battles.

Battalion commander Vũ Lãng reported on the Đại Bục battle. The garrison company had occupied two hills. At 16:30 hours, they opened fire. Artillery guns were aimed directly at the targets.

Bomb-releasing guns were used in fighting for the first time. A trail of red flames engulfed the entire position, then came a deafening explosion. Many houses caught fire. Phốc Kê, a German combatant jumped up and cried out, brandishing his arms: "Long live Việt Nam! Long live Việt Nam!" In that battle, our troops brought a drum. The battalion commander ordered the drum to be beaten while the troops launched their assault.

Writer Nguyễn Tuân was there, grasped the stick, and beat the drum. The soldiers, in bare feet, rushed forth, running over the burning porcupine quill-like fence and entering the stronghold. At the main gate, the French commanding officer had hung the inscription "Villa of Roses." Thirty minutes later, the Đại Bục post was completely destroyed.

Battalion commander Vũ Yên reported on the Đại Phác battle. This was the sub-sector command post, defended by more troops than Đại Bục. The battalion commander did not wait for artillery pounding. He ordered mortars fired into the camp and smaller weapons to close the crenels so that our troops could use ladders to get over the fences. From the undestroyed blockhouses, the enemy fired back violently. Having learned from the experience of the Phủ Thông battle, this time our combatants were armed with spears and with rifles, bazookas, and sub-machine guns. The fire points within the camp were silenced, and our assailants eliminated the resistance pockets. Đại Phác was destroyed after one hour.

Comrades Vũ Yên and Vũ Lăng reported on the Phố Ràng battle, which was fought fiercely for 40 hours. Relying on difficult terrain, the French put up a frenzied resistance. Hidden under solid fortifications, they shot mortars almost vertically and fired at our soldiers who had thrashed their way into the camp. Finally, Battalions 11 and 54 coordinated their actions and destroyed the enemy position.

6

At the end of July, the French had to abandon a series of small positions around Cao Bằng town because of the insurmountable difficulties they faced and consolidated their strongholds along Highway 4. On August 9, they withdrew from Bắc Cạn town; then they pulled out of a number of other posts in Cao Bằng. At the news of the liberation of Bắc Cạn, Uncle Hồ instructed that a meeting should be held in Bắc Cạn town to enhance the victory and stimulate the army and the people's spirit of resistance. The meeting was organized on August 24. I represented the government and read out the order of the day, which read in part:

"Since the beginning of the year, on the order of the government and President Hồ, our forces have waged strong offensives and won successive successes on the battlefields of Cao-Bắc-Lạng, the Northeast, the Lô River, the Thao River, and the Northwest.

"In the meantime, throughout the country, on the battlefields of Highway 5, Hà Nội, Hải Vân, Bình Trị Thiên, north Quảng Nam, Tây Nguyên, Đèo Cả, Đồng Tháp Mười, and other war fronts in Nam Bộ, our army and people have achieved many exploits.

"We annihilated a significant portion of the enemy's strength and destroyed many of their camps and mobile contingents.

"We liberated large regions, particularly in the Northeast and the Northwest.

"On August 9, the Cao-Bắc-Lạng battlefield won a new victory. Bắc Cạn and part of Cao Bằng were liberated. At the same time, in the last few days, the enemy was wiped out from a number of districts along the Thao and Đà Rivers. These were important victories in the initial stage of our active defense and preparation for a general counter-offensive by our people and army.

"So, the enemy's plan to control our base region of Việt Bắc has been broken, their scheme of deluding the people of the mountain region has met again with a bitter failure.

"Now more than ever, Cao-Bắc-Lạng and Việt Bắc as a whole have become our solid base region for maintaining and pushing forward the resistance to victory..."

On August 25, after the meeting to celebrate the liberation of Bắc Cạn, I wrote to the secretary of the Party committee and the chairman of the resistance committee of Cao Bằng, to make some suggestions on the recovery of the newly liberated town and some other immediate problems:

"1. The preparation to enter the town must be meticulously done. Inside the town our bases must be consolidated... Outside the town the military, the people, and the administration must act following a unified plan...

"2. Upon entering the town, urgent military works must be undertaken: impose a curfew, look for enemy's traps, capture traitors and spies, confiscate their property, and set up the provisional administration of the town.

"The army must take control of the town during the first few days before handing it over to an administrative organ of the local people.

"The principle to follow is that when entering the town, the prestige of our government must always be enhanced. The influence of the first moments is very important.

"The situation at the border changes quickly... We should envisage the crossing of the border by Chiang Kai Shek's troops.

"I sent you military instructions regarding questions to be dealt with at the border, in accordance with the policy of the Central Committee. I did not send it via the zone because of the urgency of the subject. The comrades had to arrange cadres during the next week and report to the zone.

"The liaison with the Center and the Inter-zone is of prime importance. Regime 74 would let the TSF station to Cao Bằng (the provincial command). Everyday, the station must contact the High

Command once to report on the border situation. Telephone lines must be repaired via Bắc Cạn. Liaison by messenger must be improved.

"The Tĩnh Túc mine must be kept intact, people from the Armament Department and the Ministry of Economy will come for study. Sabotages must be prevented.

"I repeat, the question of liaison must be heeded. Rapid liaison ensures timely actions by the troops."

7

From 1948 I was entrusted with assisting the Lao revolution and the following up on the Cambodian revolution. In March, the High Command issued an instruction on "the guiding principle and the direction of activities on the battlefields of Laos and Cambodia," stressing that helping our friends to build political bases was a primary necessity. For this purpose, political cadres were to be secretly dispatched to the enemy zone and armed propagation units were to be used. Wherever the political base was fairly strong, guerilla warfare could be waged eventually to create an anti-French base or a liberated zone. The principle of "preserving our forces so that the longer we fight, the stronger we become" had to be abided by. Laos must also be helped to train cadres. I recommended that the responsible comrades from the Party committees and military commands of Inter-zones 1, 10 and 12 find Lao youths to train into cadres for the Lao revolution.

I received a report from Nguyễn Khang, secretary of the Party committee of Zone 12, saying that a number of Lao students in Bắc Giang often talked about struggling against the French. Their political tendencies were still unknown. I asked Nguyễn Khang to inform the leader of these students that the High Command would like to invite him for a meeting. In mid-1948, I went to Văn Lãng, Đại Từ District, Thái Nguyên Province, to meet Kaysone

Phomvihane. This young student, whom I met for the first time, left with me an impression of sincerity, intelligence, and energy. He expressed the wish to be helped by Vietnamese soldiers after his return to Laos. The resistance war in Laos was in a difficult phase. He was confident that he would find people in Laos of the same mind and be able to form an organization of fighters. I said our troops were preparing to open a way through the French occupied area in the Northwest to the Việt Nam-Laos border. He asked to join the operation. He knew the Thai language and could easily make contact with the local population. He was conscious of the difficulties and dangers awaiting him, but he was optimistic and confident. He said that the Lao people were Buddhist followers and peace-lovers, then he repeated Uncle Hồ's view: "But it must be peace in independence and freedom." Therefore, they would unite with the Vietnamese to fight for the liberation of Laos from foreign aggressors.

I appreciated his views and spent three days discussing how to mobilize the people, create political bases, organize the militia, train cadres, build armed forces, and form a liberated zone. Thereafter I had him accompany Bế Sơn Cương's unit in Mộc Châu which was opening a way to Sameua. I advised him to pay attention to the region of Xiềng Khọ. In the meantime, in Inter-zone 5, Phạm Văn Đồng, who represented our government in South Central Việt Nam, had talks with Thao Xổm, a representative of the Lao Issara government. Both parties agreed on the policy and coordinated measures to be taken in Lower Laos. Then Phạm Văn Đồng talked with Khamtay Xiphandon and Xuthon Commadam about the help Việt Nam could give Laos in order to step up the building of bases and the development of guerilla warfare in the provinces of Lower Laos.

Some time later, Kayson Phomvihane and Thao Ma, together with a group of armed propagation units of several dozen Lao combatants, entered Upper Laos from northwest Việt Nam to form

the Lat Xa Vong armed unit. Guerilla warfare then developed in many localities in Upper Laos. In 1949, the Lao people's resistance war witnessed many changes. On January 20, in Xiềng Khọ, Sameua, Kaysone Phomvihane declared the formation of the Lao Issara army, the precursor of the present-day People's Liberation Army of Laos. I had cooperated on many occasions with Kaysone Phomvihane in Sameua, Việt Bắc, Hà Nội, and Vientiane, while he was Defense Minister in the Pathet Lao government of resistance as well as later when he was secretary general of the Revolutionary People's Party of Laos, President of Laos, and Prime Minister of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos. We shared many profound experiences as comrades and forged an intimate, pure and faithful friendship.

In March, the liberated zone was set up in Lower Laos and the resistance committee of Vientiane was established. The Lao army men and the Vietnamese volunteers were closely united, and coordinated their activities in various provinces and together achieved many successes. The Lao-Việt forces also worked with Vietnamese troops in the Mã River campaign, attacking and destroying the Xiềng Khọ enemy post and forcing them to withdraw from a number of small positions. This allowed the Lao-Việt forces to develop political and guerilla bases in the area.

As advocated by the Party Central Committee and the government, the resistance committee of Nam Bộ set up a Foreign Affairs Commission to study, plan, and organize forces to assist in the Cambodian revolution. At the request of our Cambodian friends and as entrusted by the Foreign Affairs Commission, Zones 7, 8, and 9 successively dispatched cadres and armed units to Cambodia to help them build political bases among the people and to develop their forces and guerilla activities.

Zone 9 sent men to coordinate activities with the Cambodians in Takeo, Kampot. Sơn Ngọc Minh, a well-known patriot of Cambodia, mobilized the local population and built political and

military forces strong enough to control a resistance base covering four districts. Zone 8 sent cadres to help build bases in Pray Veng and Căng Đan, expanding their activity to Takeo and Svay Rieng. They helped found the Issarac organization and set up national liberation committees in many places. Cadres and combatants from Zone 7, together with Cambodian officers and men, organized mixed forces called the Sivotha troops, operating in Svayrieng. They fought a number of battles, liberated many *phum* (villages), and several times cut off the land and river transport line between Saigon and Phnom Penh. Zone 5 also sent cadres to help our Cambodian friends build bases in Strungtreng and Kratie.

By the end of 1949, the Cambodian resistance movement had developed fairly well. Fourteen of the country's fifteen provinces had liberated zones and guerilla bases. As the resistance movement spread to the plains, the French command was compelled to bring 6,000 troops from Nam Bộ to Cambodia for defense. They set up many military posts along the Việt Nam-Cambodia border in an attempt to prevent a coordinated struggle between our two countries' revolutionary armed forces.

8

From the beginning of the nationwide resistance, we had established close relations with the Chinese Nam Lộ (Nanlu), Bát Lộ (Balu) forces in Huanan and the command of the Điền Quế (Diangui) border region. Early in 1948, comrade Trang Điền was instructed by Zhu En Lai to meet the leaders of the Việt Minh in Việt Bắc. Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee received China's envoy at Lục Giã. Trang Điền gave an account of the war situation in China. Chiang Kai Shek's troops had intensified sweeps against the revolutionary forces in Huanan in order to consolidate their rear. Consequently, Chinese guerilla units at the frontier were

in difficulty and had insufficient food. We discussed with Trang Điền how best to coordinate efforts and provide mutual assistance.

Early in March, Chiang Kai Shek's troops launched a fierce attack at Trấn Biên (Zhenbian) and Tĩnh Tây (Jingxi). Some of the guerillas and those in the rear area of these regions temporarily crossed the border into Việt Nam for safety. The command of the Điền Quế border region and the Party committee of the Việt Quế (Yuegui) border region maintained continuous contact with our side.[89]

In April 1949, the leaders of the guerilla movement in Guangxi, which adjoined the northeast border of Việt Nam, proposed that Vietnamese forces join the fighting to liberate the Ung-Long-Khâm (Yong-Long-Qin) region. When our Central Committee gave the green light on 23 April 1949, the High Command ordered Inter-zone 1 to help the Chinese liberation army create a liberated zone in Ung-Long-Khâm, at the same time stepping up activity in the north-east to expand the liberated zone to the border and to the sea, and to link it to the Việt Quế liberated zone in China.

The Order clearly underlined the need to politically educate the troops before they set out on the necessity of creating solidarity between new China and new Việt Nam, between the Chinese liberation forces and our army. Our cadres and combatants had to understand the propitious conditions as well as the difficulties and the need to respect the habits and customs of the local population, enhance political discipline, and pay attention to developing agitation among the people. All questions had to be settled on the basis of maintaining solidarity between the two peoples and promoting both countries' revolution, absolutely avoiding "departmentalism."

89. The Điền Quế border region is the border region of Yunnan – Guangxi provinces. The Việt Quế border region is the border region of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces

Our common campaign was set up with Lê Quảng Ba, deputy commander of Inter-zone 1 as the campaign commander, and Trần Minh Giang, a Chinese cadre, as political commissar. They jointly commanded the Shi Wan Da San zone. The campaign included two battlefields. The Điền Quế battlefield was led by Nam Long with Hoàng Bình, a Chinese officer, as deputy commander and Đỗ Trình as political commissar. The Long Châu (Lung Zhou) battlefield was commanded by Thanh Phong with Chu Huy Mân and Long Xuyên as deputy commanders. The general staff appointed a group of staff officers for the new command zone who would follow the developments of the campaign and report to the High Command.

Early in June, our troops set out in two directions: Long Châu and Khâm Châu (Qinzhou) - Phòng Thành (Fangcheng). On June 12, the Long Châu battlefield opened fire, destroying the Thủy Khẩu (Shuikou) and Hạ Đống (Xiadong) posts. Coordinating troops attacked the enemy from Bằng Tường (PengXiang) down to Nam Quan. Chiang Kai Shek troops shrank back into a group of solid strongholds. The High Command instructed our joint troops to besiege Long Châu, to drive back rescuing forces, to cut off supplies, and to attack Ninh Minh (Ningming) and Thượng Kim (Shangjin) in order to help our Chinese friends enlarge and consolidate the newly liberated zone around Long Châu.

In the direction of Điền Quế and Shi Wan Da San, our troops' advance was more difficult. They had to go up and down hills and across dales for nearly a month under the scorching summer sun before reaching their destination. Discovering our forces, Chiang's troops abandoned many of their positions and withdrew to large towns such as Nà Lường, Phòng Thành, and Đông Hưng (Dongxing). Early in July our troops attacked Trúc Sơn (Zhusan), a town defended by four companies of Chiang's troops. We cooperated with the Chinese forces in consolidating the expanded liberated zone in Shi Wan Da San, fought back against enemy

sweeps, and drove away bandits in the Khâm Châu region. More than one regiment of the enemy were annihilated. Ten out of twelve positions were destroyed or their troops forced to withdraw to Phòng Thành district, creating an interrupted base area and narrowing the area of enemy occupation in Khâm Châu district.

In October 1949, when the Chinese armed forces in the border regions of Điền Quế and Việt Quế had contacted the main force of the Chinese liberation army, our forces were ordered to return to Việt Nam. However, one company was left to continue cooperating with our friends in building bases and in consolidating and expanding the liberated area. The weapons (over 500 fire arms of various kinds) that had been captured from Chiang's troops were returned to China's liberation troops.

The command of the Shi Wan Da San zone concluded that while "the military success was important, the political success was much more significant." Our fighting men had impressed the local population with the internationalist spirit of our revolutionary army. A number of Vietnamese officers and men remained in Chinese land during this period to fulfil this international duty.

9

In France the situation became more and more troubled. In ruling circles, serious contradictions and conflicts of interest developed between financial and industrial capitalists. The cabinet of Henri Cueille could not resolve France's difficulties or the requirements of a war which was intended to be one of "quick fighting, rapid victory," but which had already lasted four years beyond French expectations.

In Indochina, the top military commander and the highest political leader held contradictory views about the direction of the war. General Blaizot, Commander in Chief of the Expeditionary

Corps, advocated occupying and maintaining Bắc Bộ at any cost because it was "the knot" of the war. High Commissioner Pignon, on the contrary, wanted to concentrate military efforts on occupying and controlling Nam Bộ because Nam Bộ was regarded the "fan handle" of the whole Indochinese peninsula.

Fraught with great economic and financial difficulties, and bogged down in Indochina, the French government had to rely on the United States and became more and more dependent on U.S. policy. The U.S. took advantage of French difficulties, grasping the opportunity to intervene more deeply in the Indochinese war in hopes of preventing the spread of the revolution to Southeast Asia. After much negotiation and pressure, France conceded to the U.S.. In March 1949, the Elysee agreement was signed between French President Vincent Oriol, Minister of Overseas Territories Cost Floret, and Bảo Đại (Vĩnh Thụy) in Paris. France recognized the "independence" of Việt Nam on paper, but in fact it still controlled military and diplomatic affairs and had a firm grasp on the economy and finance. With this agreement, France took a further step in her scheme of "taking the war to feed the war, using Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese."

In May, in a state of passivity and difficulty, the French government sent General Revers, Chief of Staff of the French Army, as head of a mission to Indochina to study the situation and to draft a plan to deal with it. Among the members of the mission, besides a number of senators, was General Valluy, who had expanded the war to all Indochina in 1946 and was now a full general.

Revers remained in Việt Nam for over a month and visited many places. It was reported that he also went to Bắc Cạn and Cao Bằng. He contacted staff offices, units of the expeditionary corps, and military and civilian authorities. He came to the conclusion that *there could not be a military solution, and there was no hope of reversing the situation to obtain better conditions for negotiation.* The victory of the Chinese liberation army had changed the balance

of power in the Far East, creating a serious situation for the French armed forces. Revers found it necessary to develop a new French political and military strategy in Indochina. Considering Bắc Bộ to be the main battlefield, he wanted to send more troops to Bắc Bộ, expanding the area of occupation in the mid-land region and on the plain of Bắc Bộ and strengthening the defense of this region and the quadrilateral area formed by Lạng Sơn - Tiên Yên - Hải Phòng - Hà Nội, and consolidating the border. Because of the limits of his forces, however, the defense of key points received priority. He concentrated forces to safeguard the road from Lạng Sơn to Móng Cái, for example, giving up the portion from Na Sầm up North. Revers attached great importance to the development of Vietnamese puppet forces for the task of pacification, while African and European forces were mobilized to form mobile contingents.

In Revers's view, the French defense of Indochina aimed at preventing the "red wave" of continental China from spreading to Southeast Asia. This was part of the anti-communist plan of the "democratic" camp, and explained why France should actively seek assistance from the U.S.. Revers's opinions were not wholly shared by the military commanders and political authorities of Indochina. Many agreed with the idea that serious conditions might arise in the future, but their views on the solution were different. General Alexandri was particularly opposed to a French withdrawal from Cao Bằng. General Blaizot thought that there was little likelihood Chinese forces would intervene soon in Indochina, but he fundamentally shared Revers's assessment of the situation and believed that a withdrawal from Cao Bằng was necessary. High Commissioner Pignon did not consider the plain of Bắc Bộ to be unimportant, but he thought that Nam Bộ was of equal importance and should be given priority. General Revers's views were heatedly discussed.

Back to France, Revers promptly elaborated a plan to be submitted to the French government. In July, the government and the National Defense Council approved his plan to defend the

border at key points or alternatively, concentrate forces to safeguard the section of road from Lạng Sơn downward while abandoning the portion from Na Sầm upward. Yet, the most powerful people in Indochina and Bắc Bộ, namely High Commissioner Pignon, Commander in Chief Carpentier, and the commander of Bắc Bộ, Alexandri, were opposed to his plan and delayed its implementation. By August, the situation of the borderline had deteriorated. The French command was forced to withdraw from Bắc Cạn and a number of other positions. Cao Bằng, Đông Khê, and Thất Khê were maintained and strengthened.

Revers's plan marked a turning point in the Indochinese War. For the first time, the leader of the French army affirmed that France was not able to win victory in the war. Revers was also the first to see that the way out of this difficult situation for the French was "to incorporate the Indochina war into the strategic plan of the U.S.," in other words, to transfer the war to the U.S..

By the beginning of Autumn, we had the Revers's plan in hand. We decided to make it public, using the *Voice of Việt Nam*. The plan became "famous" because it resulted in a legal case in which Revers was denounced for having leaked military secrets. Beginning in mid-September, the Revers-Mas legal case—a scandal that involved many personalities in French political circles—revealed to the French public and the rest of the world just how odious and mean the power disputes among the French ruling parties had been. Chief of Staff Revers was sent to Indochina to study and draw up a new plan, but he also intended to overthrow High Commissioner Pignon and to replace him with Mas, who was then Director of the French Supreme Institute of National Defense and associated with Revers. This scheme never materialized. Using the leakage of Revers's plan to their advantage, Pignon and his group brought the case to court and Revers and Mas were removed from office. Revers lost his post but almost all what of the French later did had been included in his plan.

CHAPTER IX

THE VANGUARD DIVISION

1

The sixth conference of central-level cadres had pointed out the task of preparing for the general counter-offensive. The conference of high-ranking military and political cadres, held in mid-January 1949, identified the development of the armed forces, particularly building up main-force troops, as the most important task. The training of cadres was also a work of decisive importance. Our armed forces came into being and were developed from the political force of the masses and the struggle movement of the people. The instructions for founding the Việt Nam propagation liberation troops, the first main-force unit, for the first time revealed the position of the main-force troops, while developing the local troops and the militia.

Even in the days of the Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh with the Red self-guards, or in the time of the Bắc Sơn and the Nam Kỳ insurrections, with the national salvation units and the Nam Kỳ insurrectional troops, or even when developing the self-defense corps and the units of combatants alienated from production work in Cao-Bắc-Lạng, our Party had always attached importance to the training of cadres.

Uncle Hồ said: "Whether a work can succeed or fail depends on the competence or incompetence of cadres" and "Cadres are the root of all works. Therefore, the training of cadres is the root work of the Party."

Uncle Hồ attached special importance to the training of cadres, including military ones. He had earlier thought of sending cadres abroad to learn military matters. He sent Lê Hồng Phong, Lê Hồng Sơn, Phùng Chí Kiên, Lê Thiết Hùng, Nguyễn Sơn, and Trương Văn Lĩnh to the Military College of Hoàng Phố (Huangpu). Lê Hồng Phong was then dispatched to the Soviet Union to be trained at the air force academy. Uncle Hồ also intended to send students to the anti-Japanese military-political in Diên An (Yanan). But the world situation changed; the revolutionary movement in the country had urgent need of cadres and only Cao Hồng Lĩnh could go.

The training of military cadres in the country was proposed after the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee in May 1941, when our Party put forward its policy on preparing for armed insurrection. For the training of cadres, Uncle Hồ wrote "The Tactical Way of Guerilla Warfare," "Experience of the Chinese Guerilla," "Experience of the French Guerilla," "The Use of Military Forces of Sun Tzu", and *The Way of Training a Military Cadre,* a new title for the book on training generals by Khổng Minh (Kongming). He always reminded us that to develop the movement steadily, we had to find faithful and determined people and train them into core cadres of the national salvation organizations. During this period, at the interprovinces of Cao-Bắc-Lạng, Lê Thiết Hùng, Lê Quảng Ba, and Bằng Giang opened military training courses in various districts. Hoàng Sâm and I opened several successive courses for local military cadres. The number of students in the courses amounted to the hundreds.

Under the decision of the military conference of the revolution in Bắc Kỳ in June 1945, the Anti-Japanese Military Political School was set up in the liberated zone. Uncle Hồ decided that I was to be in charge of the school. Hoàng Văn Thái was to be its director, and Thanh Phong its deputy director. The school was situated beside a stream in a village of the Dao people, near Tân Trào. It had the task of training platoon commanders. After the course, a number of

students were further trained to be political commissars. Militarily, the school taught personal fighting techniques, and section and platoon tactics according to manuals elaborated by Trương Văn Lĩnh, chief of the book-compiling division. Special attention was given to guerilla tactics, based on Uncle Hồ's book *The Tactical Way of Guerilla Warfare* and the experience drawn from our first battles. Politically, the fundamental training was in revolutionary ethics and behavior, the lines and policies of the Party, the agitation of the people, and armed propagation work. The students chosen to become political commissars learned in addition *The Political Commissar* by Phạm Văn Đồng, and the *Political Work in a Revolutionary Army,* written by me. These two books were compiled in 1941, at the time of building the self-guard and the self-defense units in Cao Bằng.

The school lay adjacent to Tân Trào. To maintain secrecy, Uncle Hồ, disguised as an old man of Nùng ethnicity, went to the students' bathing place to meet them. He talked with them naturally, thoughtfully asked about their living, their study, and the working conditions of the people in the plain. The students thought he was just an old man of Nùng ethnicity fluently in the Kinh (Vietnamese) language. Only later in Hà Nội did they discover that it was Uncle Hồ.

Two months before the general insurrection, the Anti-Japanese Military Political School had opened three courses, training 234 commanders and political commissars. The number of trained cadres was not large, the duration of the course was not long, but they constituted a precious asset for the development of the armed forces in the initial stage.

The August Revolution triumphed. The School was moved to Hà Nội and re-named the Military and Political School of Việt Nam, which was located at the Đỗ Hữu Vị Senior Secondary School, presently the Phan Đình Phùng Senior Secondary School at Cửa Bắc Street. Trương Văn Lĩnh was appointed director of the school. The school was operating when the war broke out in Nam Bộ. I visited

the School and encouraged its students to make greater efforts in study and to prepare for the battlefield. Two weeks later, the course was wound up. All the students volunteered to go southward.

Chiang Kai Shek's troops entered the North. To avoid provocations, in October 1945, Uncle Hồ changed the name of the school into the Cadres Training School of Việt Nam and moved it to the Việt Nam University Campus. Trần Tử Bình was appointed political commissar. Some time later, it was moved again to Sơn Tây.

In March 1946, the Central Committee of the Party decided to set up the Bắc Sơn Military and Political School. The students were comprised of youths and cadres who had joined the Việt Minh and were chosen by the provincial Việt Minh organization. Many of them were members of the Communist Party of Việt Nam. The first entrance class was taken charge of by the Việt Minh general committee, then the command of Zone 1 took over the second entrance class.

The coalition government for resistance was set up. To implement Uncle Hồ's instruction and the decision of the Military Commission, on April 17, 1946 the Defense Ministry decided to establish the Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College on the basis of the Cadres Training School of Việt Nam. Hoàng Đạo Thúy, a patriotic teacher who had participated in the Tân Trào People's Congress, was appointed director of the college, and Trần Tử Bình political commissar.

After attending the Đà Lạt conference, I visited the Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College. Since we did not fully envisage tactical methods in an unequal war, and guerilla warfare in particular, the training program included many inappropriate subjects. Much of the time was devoted to the movements of army ranks, formalities, car driving, motorcycle riding, horse riding, and so on. I instructed the head of the Military Training Department and the director of the College to cease the unnecessary elements in the training program.

The training of cadres must be practical and realistic to meet the requirement of an army which was preparing to wage a nationwide resistance war in face of the new situation. I also emphasized the political education of the students.

In the South, the Quảng Ngãi Secondary School of Ground Forces was founded in June 1946 with Nguyễn Sơn as director and Nguyễn Chính Giao as political commissar, who was later replaced by Đoàn Khuê. The school opened a five-month training course for 500 students, but because of the war's expansion, the school stopped operating.

With the development of the army, the improvement of battalion and regiment cadres' capability became pressing. The Standing Central Committee decided on the organization of refresher courses for middle-level cadres. The class was inaugurated in July 1946 in Tông (Sơn Tây). It organized two training courses which ended in the first days of the nationwide war.

In the process of preparing for the war, we had paid great attention to the training and improvement of cadres at the grassroots level. We had a large number of cadres, particularly those of platoon to battalion level, to broaden the training of troops and help the local armed forces. At the conference of regional chiefs on December 13, 1946, in Hà Đông town, chief of staff, Hoàng Văn Thái, reported that due to the active organization of training and refresher courses, the shortage of cadres had been overcome.

War broke out all over the country. The Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College was moved to Zone 4 for a short period and directed by Nguyễn Sơn, commander of the zone. In March 1947, the Defense Ministry decided to open a sub-institute of the Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College in Bắc Bộ with Hoàng Đạo Thúy as director. In September 1947, the Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College returned to Việt Bắc, merged with the Bắc Bộ sub-institute and changed its name to the Trần Quốc Tuấn Secondary School of Ground Forces. Lê Thiết

Hùng was appointed director and secretary of the Party committee of the school. The school was consolidated and strengthened for the training of infantry commanders as well as specialist infantry officers.

The resistance war had lasted nearly one thousand days. Combat experience had been gained. Students were taught guerilla warfare, the fundamental task of the army in the current period, the guiding principle regarding the independent companies and concentrated battalions, and methods of attacking small strongholds. They also studied the experience of the campaign against the Việt Bắc offensive, the ambushes on Highway 4, and Highway 5, the Hói Mít battle, the La Ngà battle and so on.

Artillery and engineering divisions were set up. The School chose a number of qualified students to be trained into officers of different military branches.

Our knowledge of military branches was not comprehensive. It was the first time that we had trained cadres in this field from officers originally trained as commanders of ground forces. This experience was effectively applied during the period of building the people's army into a regular and modern army, and also in the struggle against the war of destruction by the US air and naval forces against North Việt Nam.

In mid-1949, the Defense Ministry organized the Sub-institutes of Ground Forces Schools in Nam Bộ and Trung Bộ. The Trần Quốc Tuấn Secondary School of Ground Forces was responsible for sending teachers for these Sub-institutes.

While stressing the training of platoon and company commanders, we realized that the training of battalion and regiment commanders remained insufficient. Faced with the urgent building of armed forces, in mid-1947, the Defense Ministry decided to open refresher courses for battalion and regiment commanders. Their training programme included methods for organizing the troops, the combat experience gained after six months of war, and the military

line of the Party. The course was inaugurated in early August 1947 in La Bằng, Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên, with 83 students. Hoàng Văn Thái was directly in charge of the course. The students were organized into a company with Phan Tử Lăng as commander and Trần Tử Bình as political commissar. By February 1948, we had organized three courses with 143 students.

To prepare for the building of strong regiments with the aim of establishing divisions, it was necessary to train middle-level military and political cadres. On 12 March 1948, the Defense Ministry founded the Middle-level Military-political School by Decision No 88/BCH.

The first school year began at Sói Mít, Tân Cương, Đồng Hỷ, Thái Nguyên, with 110 students. The curriculum covered the political line of the resistance, the building of base areas, building and training of the militia and guerilla, strategies, campaigns, tactics, organization and command of fighting, and military management. By May 1950, the School had organized five courses with 675 students.

Within four years, from July 1946 to May 1950, ten consecutive courses were run, improving the capability of over 1,000 middle-level commanders. This greatly contributed to the building and fighting of our armed forces during the first years of the resistance war. Many comrades from these courses would later become generals, and high-ranking officers holding high responsibilities in the two resistance wars of the nation; among them were Vũ Lăng, Vũ Yên, Thái Dũng, Nam Hà, Trần Văn Nghiêm, Anh Đệ.

Besides the schools for the training of commanders, we also organized a number of other schools, such as the Lê Bình School of Militia Cadres, the Việt Nam School of Military Physicians, the Cultural Complementary School for Cadres, and the School of Young Cadets. Courses for professional training and refresher courses were also organized according to the requirements of the war, such as staff work, intelligence, cryptography, etc.

The schools for the training of our military cadres were all placed under the strict leadership of the ministry and the Party Central Military Commission. The training program always covered both military and political content.

During the first years of the resistance, the teaching staff was comprised of comrades who had graduated from short or long-term courses in China, around the time of Chiang Kai Shek. We also employed a number of patriotic ex-combatants and Japanese officers who had voluntarily sided with us. Therefore, the content of the military course generally bore the imprints of the teachers of these various sources. Our success lay in their knowledge of individual combat, maneuver, and military specialized operations. As for tactics, we had soon introduced into the training program the content of the resolutions of military conferences and the fighting experiences of our soldiers in various battlefields, with an emphasis on successful precedents. Party and political work also received great attention. The students were provided with the Party's line of resistance and resolutions. The Party also designated its outstanding cadres to take charge of the schools.

Uncle Hồ attached great importance to the training at military schools. He repeatedly visited or wrote letters of encouragement to the schools. He attended the opening and the closing ceremonies of the 5th course of the Việt Nam Cadres Training School and said that he should have liked to come more often. He also visited the first entrance class of the Trần Quốc Tuấn Military College three times.

His teaching at the opening ceremony on 26 May 1946 of the first entrance class of the College, "Loyalty to the country, piety to the people" became the oath of all generations of officers and men of our armed forces.

A military cadre could never forget his words: "A good officer must be prompted by revolutionary ethics. If he is good at military matters but deprived of revolutionary ethics, it is difficult for him to succeed."

Military generals had to remember that their task was being "knowledgeable, courageous, humane, straightforward, honest, and faithful."

After four years of fighting under siege, with our correct line of training cadres, our rich, flexible mode of training, both at schools and in real fighting, we had at our disposal military, political, and specialized cadres to meet the requirements of the resistance; all acted in the service of building strong regiments and main-force divisions, and in developing the armed forces in the new phase.

2

After the decision on the preparation for the general counter-offensive was taken, Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee felt it necessary to strengthen the leadership in central organs. In the first days of the resistance, a number of comrades had been given tasks in key regions all over the country. Lê Duẩn and Phạm Hùng in Nam Bộ, Phạm Văn Đồng in Zone 5 as representatives of the Party Central Committee and the government, Nguyễn Duy Trinh, Nguyễn Chánh, Hồ Tùng Mậu, Nguyễn Chí Thanh, and Trần Hữu Dực in Zone 4 and Bình-Trị-Thiên battlefield. After some years of fighting, the cadres of the locality had matured. Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee decided to call back some of the envoys to the central organs, firstly to withdraw Phạm Văn Đồng from Zone 5.

Early in June 1949, Phạm Văn Đồng reached Việt Bắc, after over three months' traveling. The itinerary was hard and tiring not only because of the hills and dales along the Trường Sơn range, but also because it passed through many enemy controlled areas.

After a detailed report to Uncle Hồ and the Standing Central Committee and a visit to Trường Chinh and the secretariat of the Central Committee, Phạm Văn Đồng went to Bao Biên to visit the

High Command. We were delighted to meet each other after more than two years of separation. He related his travel from Zone 5 to Việt Bắc, particularly the hard legs of the journey in Bình Trị Thiên, passing Liên U, Ba Rền, U Bò, and Cao Mại, the familiar names with cadres going back and forth between the North and the South. These popular names, full of images, reflected the hardship of the journey. From Quảng Bình to Hà Tĩnh, it took 15-20 days of trekking, or longer, depending on the rainy days and the flooding streams. Stopping at Nghệ An to attend the provincial Party congress, he met Nguyễn Chí Thanh and was informed of the situation of Inter-zone 4. In Thanh Hóa he met Đặng Thai Mai and Đặng Việt Châu in Thọ Xuân.

On 14 June 1949, the Government Council met to hear Phạm Văn Đồng's report on the situation of Zone 5 and his remarks on the provinces he had passed from Zone 5 to Việt Bắc. The Central Committee received annual reports on the situation of Zone 5, and once Nguyễn Duy Trinh personally went North to report. This time, Phạm Văn Đồng came to Việt Bắc after having just presided over the first conference of political commissars in the inter-zone together with Nguyễn Duy Trinh and Nguyễn Chánh.

Zone 5 still had difficulties, but had made significant achievements. In coordination with the battlefields of all the country, Zone 5 had stirred up guerilla warfare, initially smashing the enemy scheme of pacification in their area of occupation. The free zone was consolidated in all respects and began to be able to meet the needs of the resistance and the people's life. The army and people of Zone 5 had fulfilled the recommendation of the Central Committee and Uncle Hồ when Phạm Văn Đồng went South. That recommendation was to persevere in fighting the enemy and to win victory on the battlefields of South Central Việt Nam.

Early in 1948, Zone 5 faced almost insurmountable difficulties. Food was scarce, military units deployed in the enemy's rear had to

eat fruits and cassava for months. Each combatant had only one set of tattered clothes. When sick, they had no medicine and sometimes a carpenter's saw and tailor's scissors were used for surgical operations. Arms and ammunition were in serious shortage.

Our operational areas were isolated. The enemy surrounded us on all sides. Supplies from strategic rear areas dried up. Amidst these hardships, Inter-zone 5 relied on its own strength to prevail.

The Nam-Ngãi-Bình-Phú free zone had nearly two million inhabitants, rugged mountains and thick forests, and rich natural resources; the plain, though narrow, was rich and fertile. The Zonal Party Committee mobilized the population to increase production and to practice self-sufficiency. Everybody, old, young, adults and children worked together to materialize the motto "All the people engaged in agriculture" to plant at least ten square meters of vegetables, and to rear at least one chicken. Each family grew at least 10 mulberry trees for silviculture or 10 cotton trees to weave cloth.

The people constructed tens of irrigational works. The Bầu Súng canal in Mộ Đức ran through 1,000 meters of sandstone mountain. The Sơn Tịnh, the Phú Sơn canals, the Tuy Phước dyke irrigated thousands of hectares of rice fields. Cassava and maize were cultivated everywhere to ensure self-sufficiency in food.

Mulberry trees were grown on the banks of the Tam Kỳ, Trà Khúc, Vệ, and Côn rivers. Cotton plants covered tens of thousands of hectares.

Silk and cloth weaving was strongly developed. Over ten thousand looms of the people, hundreds of looms of the Việt Thắng State-owned Weaving Mill and the Military Weaving Mill supplied enough clothes to the troops, and each man annually received two meters of cloth on average.

The production of paper, soap, ceramics, and glasswares was developed.

Twenty one weapon producing factories could produce a number of sophisticated arms designed in Việt Bắc such as 60mm bazookas, 50.8 mm hand grenade throwers, mortars, and 60mm SKZ.

With the permission of the central government, Zone 5 issued bonds which were circulated not only in the free zone but also in certain enemy-controlled regions. The successful monetary struggle testified to the strength of the resistance and the stability of production in the free zone.

A steady development in general education was achieved. The number of junior and senior secondary school students increased 40 times that of colonial times. There were no illiterate people in the free zone.

A great success of Zone 5 was the guarantee of smooth communication and transport. Thanks to the correct policy on destruction, after only six months of restoration, in June 1948, the 300-km-long railway from An Tân (Tam Kỳ, Quảng Nam) to La Hai (Đồng Xuân, Phú Yên) resumed operation and was maintained until the end of the resistance war (although sometimes trolleys had to be used). Liaison from the free zone of Phú Yên to the extreme south of Central Việt Nam and Nam Bộ had been operating since the end of 1946. The corridor from the free zone of Quảng Nam to the free zone of Zone 4 had been consolidated by mid-1948. From then, the maritime communication line to the southern battlefields began to be opened.

Zone 5 had recorded initial success in keeping the land and mobilizing the population of Tây Nguyên, and gradually broke the three major policies of the French colonialists in this region, thereby creating a base for the future strategic offensive.

Tây Nguyên was a region of great strategic importance. In the order on "the strategic task of south Trung Bộ in the new phase of the war" 23 dated August 1948, I stressed that "The Tây Nguyên region was of primary importance. The control of Tây Nguyên

entails the control of all South Việt Nam (not to mention the economic possibilities). In Tây Nguyên, special attention must be paid to two key places: Buôn Ma Thuột, a military center, and Đà Lạt, a political center."

Twenty seven years later, in Spring 1975, Buôn Ma Thuột was chosen as the target of the great strategic offensive against the south Tây Nguyên battlefield. The onslaught had shaken the entire enemy defensive system, offering the opportunity for the liberation of South Việt Nam in 1975.

After the complete liberation of South Việt Nam, I went several times on business to Tây Nguyên. I came to the Xito base of hero Núp, to Đắc Tô - Tân Cảnh, and Sa Thầy region. The more I went, the more clearly I realized the heroism of Tây Nguyên, the staunchness, the loyalty to the revolution, the respect and affection for Uncle Hồ held by the ethnics of Tây Nguyên.

I very much admired the cadres and combatants who, during the days of hardships, had gone to the villages and hamlets to contact the people, bringing the light of the revolution to the local population. Many cadres and combatants of the Kinh ethnic group had filed their teeth and stretched their ears, deliberately sunburn themselves with a view to mixing with the local people. The struggle on this silent front, without military posts, without barbed wired fences, without battlefield was, contrary to what would be expected, extremely hard and required no small sacrifices.

In mid July 1949, the Standing Central Committee held a meeting. The resistance war was shifting to a new phase. Uncle Hồ was very busy. Military campaigns were successively launched in the northeast and northwest. The Standing Central Committee appointed Phạm Văn Đồng Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of the Party organization in the government so that I might concentrate on military affairs.

On 25 July 1949 the Government Council held a meeting. The ministers had come one after another. Uncle Hồ invited each minister for a private exchange of views on the question of Deputy Prime Minister. The session was started at 11 a.m. Phạm Văn Đồng was sworn in and Lê Văn Hiến proposed that Phạm Văn Đồng would also be Deputy Chairman of the Supreme National Defense Council.

At that meeting, the Government Council discussed and settled military, political, economic, and cultural questions in preparation for grasping the propitious opportunity brought about by the new situation.

3

The headquarters of the High Command was now in Điềm Mạc. Its office was in Bao Biên. The general staff was based in Đồng Đau.

In all parts of Việt Bắc were seen mottoes "to put up active defense and to firmly shift to general counter offensive." The atmosphere was very animated. On the road, many troops were seen, some coming from the Lô and the Thao river, others going to Highway 3, Highway 4 war fronts. Everybody appeared to be in a hurry.

The economic blockade by the enemy was very stringent. They strove to prevent food grains from being transported to the free zone. They forged a great quantity of bank notes and brought them into use in the Việt Minh zone. The price of rice, therefore, skyrocketed. The troops were underfed. The commanders had to go to civilian offices and mass organizations to borrow rice daily. Very often the soldiers had to eat sweet potatoes or cassava to relieve their hunger. They all knew that fierce battles were awaiting them, but all were enthusiastic.

In mid-August, the Standing Central Committee met again.

From Điềm Mạc, I went to the house of communal chairman Chanh, then to Châu Tự Do. People appeared in every nook and cranny in Việt Bắc, but the way to Tân Trào remained as deserted as before. The scene was retained for security reasons. Yellow monkeys cried noisily and took flight on hearing the galloping of my horse.

Tân Trào village was cleaner than before but remained quiet. Two old banyans and the wooden communal house built after the model of the plain still looked as they were on the day of the first People's Congress. No indication revealed that there was an official organ here. Throughout the anti-French resistance war, enemy spies could never discover the residence of Uncle Hồ.

For the past few days, it had been raining; up stream, the Đáy river was turbid. A volleyball ground lay in the heart of the forest, beyond it there were a number of huts. Uncle Hồ's residence was here.

He was typing; on my arrival, he looked out, smiling,

"Brother Văn!"

He took out his spectacles, closed his typewriter, and stood up to shake hands with me. He did not let me have time to enquire about his health, he said,

"You look a little pale."

"Uncle, I am all right."

He smiled. A moment later, Trường Chinh and Phạm Văn Đồng arrived.

At the meeting, I reported on the progress of the troops on the battlefields, the fighting coordination of our forces with our Chinese friends in expanding their base at the Việt Nam-China border, and the plan to form the first main-force division of the ministry in preparation for large-scale battles.

The Standing Central Committee discussed the new developments of the Chinese revolution, their effects on the

Vietnamese resistance, the opinions of the troops and the people after the plan for general counter-offensive was revealed, prevision of the enemy scheme after Revers' trip, and the possible deeper intervention of the US into the Indochinese war.

It was unanimously remarked that the Việt Bắc base region must be consolidated, the enemy pressure in the northeast be reduced, the frontier opened, and the French siege be broken. The enemy were increasing their forces, the fighting would be fierce, but the prospects were bright. The Standing Central Committee decided on the mobilization of all the army and people to step up all activities of the resistance. They also decided to launch large-scale counter offensives to defeat the French before the US deeper intervention. Uncle Hồ reminded us that in propagation work, the US should not yet be mentioned before its direct intervention in the Indochinese war.

At meal time, Uncle Hồ, we, and all the officers at the office, sit around some bamboo tables. The food basket was brought in; the greater part was cassava grown by the office, rice was in very little proportion. The only dish of aliment was bamboo shoots served with salt. Knowing that there would be a meeting, some guards had gone in search of something to improve the meal. But the hunt failed; fishing was fruitless because in rainy days the streams swelled, fishes found enough food and did not take the bait.

Uncle Hồ told his secretary at the table nearby:

"Today, we have guests, please bring the special dish!"

The special dish was in a piece of bamboo trunk. Uncle Hồ opened the lid and apportioned to each table a kind of food of red color. This was minced pork mixed with chilly and salt. He often used it on his journey. He added:

"Any brother who cannot eat much chilly is advised not to eat it with bamboo shoots. You should be accustomed to chilly as it is very rich in vitamins."

These were very warm moments when we could meet and sit around Uncle Hồ.

4

In May 1947 the main-force troops of the ministry had been considerably strengthened, including two regiments and four battalions. The High Command believed that it was necessary to have a mighty concentrated force to cope with the enemy's offensives. In July 1947, after the issuance of the Government Decree, the High Command entrusted the building of the first main-force division to the general staff.

At the time of the Việt Bắc campaign, we had realized that it was impossible to organize at once large military units. On the contrary, if the enemy policy on occupation and massive offensives against our base area were to be opposed it was necessary to divide into concentrated units to wage the people's war and small mobile battles. The regiments had been divided into independent companies and deployed in the localities. The remaining units fought at battalion size only.

The guiding principle of independent companies and concentrated battalions had been applied for two years. Our armed forces had achieved much progress. The militia and the guerillas had been trained in operations. Local troops of many districts had been able to replace independent companies. The concentrated battalions had matured through numerous battles and campaigns. The troops, through the movement of "military training to achieve exploits" in 1948, and the movement of "training cadre and reorganizing combatants" in 1949, particularly through operation in battlefields, had gained a great deal of battle experience. In order to stay ready to grasp each new opportunity when it came, the strategic guiding principle decided by the Central Committee plenum early in the year was: "It is necessary to push forward

mobile warfare, and when conditions are ripe, to give it a duly important position in order to shift to the phase of counter offensive," and "it is necessary to withdraw gradually the independent companies to their previous positions."

The withdrawal of the independent companies would certainly create a vacuum in places where the local troops were still underdeveloped. The resolutions of the sixth conference of central-level cadres and those of the third conference of the militia (in April 1949) had pointed out the importance of the building of local troops and the development of the militia and guerillas.

On 7 April 1949, President Hồ Chí Minh signed the decree on the organization of local troops in the provinces and districts.

On August 18, the Standing Central Committee issued the instruction: "Building local troops and developing the militia in the defensive period in preparation for general counter offensive." The instructions read: "We must have mighty main-force troops and mighty local troops. These two military forces shall be closely related, assisting each other in fighting and in developing. Therefore, to build powerful main-force troops, we must widely develop the militia movement and matured local troops."

After the sixth conference of central-level cadres, the Communist Party of Việt Nam advocated the organization of a number of divisions, and the immediate organization of the first main-force division of the ministry.

Early in April, the High Command had chosen the commanders and the units of the division. The units under the High Command were gathered together into regiments 88 and 102. The third one would be Regiment 36 of Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang.

The commander and political commissar of the division was Vương Thừa Vũ, who had been commander of Zone 11, deputy commander of the armed forces of Interzone 4. Deputy

commander Cao Văn Khánh had been commander of war Zone 5 and had just gone to the North at the beginning of summer. The division would be comprised of units that had fought in the battlefields of Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, Hà Tu, Cẩm Phả, Kiến An, Hà Đông, Sơn Tây, Hà Nam, Bắc Ninh, and Bắc Giang. All of them had recorded many military exploits.

5

On August 28, Trần Đăng Ninh and I went to Đồn Du, Phú Lương district, on Highway 3 from Thái Nguyên to Bắc Cạn. In winter 1947, the main-force battalions of the ministry had fought with the Beaufré contingent on this highway. It was the rainy season the atmosphere was humid, and all the hills and meadows were shrouded in mist. On the way, we saw Kinh, Tày, Nùng, Trại people merrily going to the founding ceremony of the division.

Passing Đồn Du, we found by the road a triumphal gate made of leaves with a large painting atop, representing a spear-wielding soldier in brown clothes and green-leaf hat, standing bare footed on a citadel wall full of flames. This was the symbol of Division 308.

On a large grassy mound beside the road stood a huge tribune decorated with green leaves. A yellow-starred red flag was flying on its roof. In front of the tribune was a platform, also made of green leaves, and roofed by some parachutes seized from the enemy.

On the grass, still humid with the night dew, the troops stood in rows and formed blocks. Machine guns, heavy and light, and mortars were placed in front of the troops. There were no uniforms. Some units wore green clothes, many others had brown, black pyjamas, but all of them had bamboo-plaited, cloth-covered hats, with a mesh-net for inserting camouflage leaves. There was an assortment of armaments. There were blocks of infantry, artillery, engineering, and communication. The military band, commanded

by Đinh Ngọc Liên, after having escaped the French parachutists in Bắc Cạn, were also present with its various kinds of shining golden wind instruments.

The division commander and political commissar was tall and thin, clad in thick khaki with narrow trouser legs stuck inside his boots. He marched to the rostrum, unsheathed his sword to salute the representatives of the government and the High Command, then invited us to review the troops.

Commanders, heads of groups and political commissars stood before their units. Their faces revealed great emotion. All of them were very young. The oldest of the division was Vương Thừa Vũ, 39 years old, the youngest was Trương Công Lũy, a fighter of the Capital-city Regiment, only 11 years old.

Many officers were old acquaintances of mine. Comrade Vũ Yên, a tall and sturdy man, well-proportioned, looking as solid as a statue. Before the revolution, he was a factory worker, and at the same time a swimming athlete. The stern-faced comrade Thái Dũng had lost his right hand in the Bản Pùm battle. Comrade Vũ Lăng had brilliant eyes, his newly razed moustache looked bluish. Comrade Doãn Tuế appeared to be simple hearted and good-natured. He was standing in front of the obsolete high caliber guns and was credited with many glorious exploits.

We stepped up on the tribune. Trần Đăng Ninh conveyed to the officers and men of the division the commendation of President Hồ Chí Minh and the government for the fighting achievements made over the past few months. He also exhorted the units to strive to serve the people, to learn with modesty, not to shun difficulties, to be worthy of being the forerunner and leading strategic mobile military unit of the country.

I read out the Order of the Day of the High Command, and expounded the reason why it was necessary to set up the first main-force division. I recalled the traditions and the glorious

exploits of the various units coming from different parts of the country to build up the division. I stressed the fundamental tasks of the division:

"... The division is to cooperate with other main-force contingents and to be vanguards in annihilating the enemy forces, and gradually to become a model regular unit of the army.

The division must be victorious whenever it wages battle

It annihilates the enemy forces whenever it wages battle

It becomes stronger and stronger

And becomes the decisive factor of the war front."

I handed the division the "Victory" flag of the High Command and pinned medals on a number of officers and men who had achieved outstanding exploits.

The majestic sounds from the instruments of the military band resounded.

The blocks of infantry standing at attention began to move and marched before the tribune.

Leading the march were three tall combatants. The man in the middle held high the "Victory" flag with two escorts armed with sub-machine guns on both sides.

Comrade Vũ Yên was at the head of the block of three battalions, 54, 18, and 79, which would form Regiment 102, the Capital-city Regiment.

Comrade Thái Dũng led the block of Regiment 88. He raised his left hand to salute when passing by the tribune.

Finally came the turn of the artillery unit. The guns that had been carried on shoulder poles by artillerymen and caused terror to the enemy, were today pulled by horses. I remembered a picture of the battles in Napoleonic times. Apparently our guns were not much more modern than the guns of that time.

The primary and decisive factor of the growth of our army was first and foremost the maturation of the officers who were leading their units before the tribune. I knew their background. They came from various social strata: workers, farmers, schoolboys, students, former soldiers, teachers, civil servants, and so on. Some came from higher social strata, from rich families.

A number of units were not present at the ceremony as they were on the way to battles. Their task was to win the first success of the division to mark its birthday.

The National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam offered the division a sword carved with four letters *Mã đáo thành công* (Horse galloping to success). The Việt Minh General Department also presented the division a sword named *Dân tộc* (Nation).

Letters and telegrams from all parts of the country, including Zone 5, Nam Bộ, were sent in great numbers to welcome the first main-force division and to wish it success in fulfilling the task of "the leading bird."

Some time later, news of victories came from the battlefields. Battalion 29 waged an outstanding movement battle in Vĩnh Yên, killing 200 enemy soldiers in Thanh Vân, Hữu Thủ. Battalion 23 staged a second ambush on Highway 4, together with a battalion of Regiment 174, neatly destroyed 93 enemy vehicles in Lũng Phầy (valley Phầy actually became a valley of fire).

At the founding ceremony of the first division, the troops as well as the local people were filled with enthusiasm. However, probably nobody, including Trần Đăng Ninh who had closely cooperated with me, could understand my feelings. I saw that we had made a big significant step in the building of main-force troops: the way we had done it had not been smooth and simple, but full of turns and complexities.

Since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, we believed that an independent state must naturally have a

corresponding army, which would not only include companies, battalions, regiments, but must also include divisions. This was an idea, however logical in certain respects, reflected my lack of experience in war.

Then, in the capacity of Minister of Home Affairs and specially in charge of military matters, and some time later secretary of the Central Military Committee, I proposed the formation of two main-force divisions. The proposal was accepted. Then, when the situation of the country became critical, through the first big and small battles with the French troops in Lạng Sơn or Hải Phòng, I clearly understood that our troops had no capacity to fight at division size. The war broke out all over the country, and the first two divisions were incorporated into two military zones. Our army then was composed only of regiments, which constituted the largest unit.

Throughout the fighting of the nationwide war, in the battles in cities and the following ones, I again realized that our troops still had no capacity to successfully fight at concentrated regiment size. As expounded in previous chapters, thanks to the occurrences on the battlefields, my proposal was accepted by the Central Committee that in the immediate future we had to make one more step backward in military organization in that the formula of operating in independent companies and concentrated battalions must be resolutely applied.

With this appropriate form of organization, our troops soon became very effective. The companies and battalions became experienced, stronger with the weapons and war materials captured from the enemy. They were also able to restore the grassroots-level administrations, and widely develop guerilla warfare, which lead to the mushrooming of the militia and guerillas. The platoons and companies of local troops were formed and gradually became in a position to replace the independent companies. That situation marked a significant development of the three kinds of forces and for some time allowed us to withdraw

the independent companies and to organize concentrated battalions. In the meantime, the battalions were forged in battalion-size battles, then in battles mobilizing several battalions, one regiment or one strengthened regiment in a series of small campaigns. At that time, we would have had conditions to organize strong main-force regiments, or divisions with their required functions. And the first division, the division of Vanguards, had come into being. This was a great lesson in the organizational field of military matters, and other matters too. According to Engel, the human factor, particularly the cadres, and the material factor, i.e. weapons and war means, are the two most fundamental and revolutionary elements. In Engel's view, it is only with the appropriate combination of these two factors and the logical organization of troops that we can obtain the most effective operations which yield corresponding successes. The organizational form and the tactical level are organically related. This constitutes a law.

The founding of the Vanguards Division was a solid progress marking the growth of our army in the war. I felt greatly enthusiastic, and confident.

To fulfill the new tasks, the High Command was preparing to form three divisions, then five. Meanwhile, the High Command and the inter-zones were ordered to build strong main-force regiments with a strong battalion in each regiment, and at the same time to control and organize the specialized arm units. The General Staff and the Political Department would prepare the necessary personnel plans.

The Lô River Regiment, the main-force regiment of Interzone 10, was completed and strengthened to become Regiment 209 and the strong regiment of Division 312. Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Bắc Cạn Regiments were reorganized to form Regiment 174 and a strong regiment of Division 316. These regiments would come under the High Command.

Inter-zone 1 consolidated Regiment 62. Interzone 3 strengthened regiments 64 and 66, Interzone 4 regiments 9, 57, and 103 of Thanh-Nghệ-Tĩnh, regiments 101, 95, and 18 of Bình-Trị-Thiên. Zone 5 consolidated Regiment 210. Nam Bộ strengthened battalions 307, 304, and 302.

The specialized units also made progress. At the end of 1949, from Inter-zone 4 to the north, the engineering corps had one battalion and 16 companies, the artillery corps had seven battalions and seven companies. The communications, the medical, and the logistics corps were strengthened.

On March 10, 1950, Division 304 was officially set up in Thọ Xuân, Thanh Hóa. Hoàng Minh Thảo was appointed division commander, Trần Văn Quang division political commissar. The division comprised Regiment 66, the main-force regiment of Inter-zone 3, regiments 57 and 9, main-force regiments of Inter-zone 4.

Division 312 included Regiment 209, main-force regiment of the ministry, Regiment 165 of the Tây Bắc northwest front, and Regiment 141 taking shape after the Biên Giới campaign. It was officially set up on December 25, 1950. Lê Trọng Tấn became division commander, Trần Độ division political commissar.

Division 320 was scheduled to be set up with regiments 48 and 64 of Inter-zone 3 and Regiment 52 going westward. But because of the expansion of the war in the plain of Bắc Bộ, it was officially established on April 16, 1951, that Văn Tiến Dũng was division commander and political commissar.

Division 325 considered March 11, 1951, the day of victory of the Thanh Hương battle, as the day of the division's traditions. But not until early 1953 did it have conditions to concentrate in the free zone of Interzone 4 for building and training. Trần Quý Hai was division commander and political commissar.

Division 316 was set up on May 1, 1951. Its core was Regiment 174 together with Regiment 176 of Lạng Sơn province and

Regiment 98 of the northeast war front. Lê Quảng Ba was division commander and Chu Huy Mân political commissar.

Regarding specialized units, engineering-artillery Division 351 was founded on March 27, 1951, including Regiment 75 of heavy guns, Regiment 105 of lighter guns, and engineering Regiment 151. Đào Văn Trường was acting division commander, Phạm Ngọc Mậu political commissar.

In Spring 1950, in Bắc Bộ war front the mobile forces of the High Command, with divisions 308 and 304, and regiments 209 and 174, excluding a number of strong regiments of the inter-zones, were already more numerous than the enemy mobile forces.

Up to September 1950, before the Biên Giới campaign, our strategic mobile forces continued to increase. Of more than 200,000 troops in the whole country, the main-force units accounted for over 160,000 with strong divisions and regiments, local forces accounted for 45,000 men. The militia and guerillas were estimated to be 2,000,000 men.

Conditions were ripe for opening offensive campaigns to eventually gain initiative on the principal battlefield.

CHAPTER X

STRIVING TO SECURE THE INITIATIVE IN THE PRINCIPAL BATTLEFIELD

1

Starting in July 1949, the French made every effort to carry out the Revers plan. On the one hand, commander-in-chief Blaizot concentrated their forces to seize Bắc Ninh, Bắc Giang, Phúc Yên, and Vĩnh Yên. On the other hand, he withdrew troops from Bắc Cạn and other positions in Phủ Thông, Nà Phạc, and Ngân Sơn on the Bắc Cạn-Cao Bằng road.

In September, General Carpentier replaced Blaizot as commander-in-chief in Indochina. Carpentier decided to implement Revers' policy "to encircle the plain of Bắc Bộ." With reinforcements coming from France, and the increased number of puppet troops, in autumn-winter 1949 and spring-summer 1950, the French Command opened many successive operations to seize Bùi Chu,[90] Phát Diệm,[91] south Hải Dương, Hưng Yên, Thái Bình, south Hà Đông, Ninh Bình, and Phủ Lý.

In October 1949, in the face of enemy schemes to expand their occupation in the Bắc Bộ plain, the Central Committee and the High Command strengthened the leadership of the Party committee and

90, 91. Two regions of Ninh Bình province where the population is wholly Catholic.

the command of Inter-zone 3 by dispatching Lê Thanh Nghị, Văn Tiến Dũng, and some other comrades there. Lê Thanh Nghị was appointed secretary of the interzonal Party committee, Văn Tiến Dũng political commissar and standing member of the inter-zonal Party committee.

In view of the successive and frenzied activities of the enemy, the command of Inter-zone 3 stepped up guerrilla warfare all over the zone to decimate the enemy and to check their advance. At the same time, the main-force units of the inter-zone energetically fought them to break their sweeps and pacification operations. The forces of the inter-zone waged battles in Tiên Hưng, Thái Ninh, and Quỳnh Côi in Thái Bình province as well as a remarkable mobile battle in Ứng Hòa, Hà Đông province.

The plain of Bắc Bộ was occupied, but the French could not pacify the areas they controlled. Thanks to the timely and accurate change of the tactical orientation, the newly captured areas overcame their initial embarrassment. They gradually restored and developed the resistance movement, causing heavy losses to the enemy and obliging them to take measures to defend themselves. The plain of Bắc Bộ would become a famous guerilla battlefield with the Nguyên Xá heroic guerillas, the heroic Regiment 42 that was called by the enemy "the Phantom Regiment," and many guerilla bases in the heart of the enemy-occupied zone.

The guerilla warfare, i.e. the people's warfare brought to a high level by our army and people in the plain of Bắc Bộ, had "rotted" the enemy system of occupation and pacification. It had paralyzed the communication lines, pinned down heir mobile contingents and caused them great losses. Moreover, the guerilla soldiers effectively coordinated their actions with the main-force troops and strongly assisted them on various battlefields. The many-sided struggle in the Bắc Bộ plain, at times tenacious and unnoisy, at times ebullient and fierce, lasted until the complete liberation of North Việt Nam.

To oppose the new scheme of the enemy, in September, the High Command ordered the preparation for the Lê Lợi campaign in Hòa Bình. The command of the campaign included Hoàng Sâm, commander-in-chief, Lê Quang Hòa, political commissar, Lê Trọng Tấn and a representative of the command of Inter-zone 4, deputy commanders.

The aims of the campaign were to destroy part of the enemy forces, eliminate enemy pressure on the back of Inter-zone 3, and expand communication lines between Việt Bắc and Inter-zone 3.

In coordination with the Lê Lợi campaign, the command of Inter-zone 10 successively opened the Mã river campaign and the Yên Bình Xã - Nghĩa Đô campaign.

After careful preparations, at the end of November, the Lê Lợi campaign began. Văn Tiến Dũng was designated political commissar in the campaign command, replacing Lê Quang Hòa.

The campaign started with the destruction of the Gốt position south of Highway 6. Regiment 66 attacked Đồng Bến, quickly assaulting and neatly annihilating a company of the enemy within fortifications. Then came an ambush which destroyed a company of French troops in Lum village (between Suối Rút and Mỏ Hẻm), a surprise attack against Phố Đúng in Hòa Bình, and an ambush in Bến Bưởi sinking two ferries and three boats full of troops. Thereafter, Suối Rút, Mỏ Hẻm, and Tử Mễ positions were destroyed. The enemy had to send 30 trucks with nearly 1,000 troops to rescue Hòa Bình from Hà Đông; Regiment 48 together with Hà Nội troops completely destroyed the convoy.

Early in December, by surrounding a position and annihilating the rescue attempt, Regiment 209 put out of action two companies of crack troops in an ambush on Highway 6, between Chợ Bờ and Mỏ Hẻm in Hòa Bình province.

After the campaign, I listened to an account by Lê Trọng Tấn, commander of Regiment 209. To rescue the threatened positions,

the enemy carried out air attacks, parachuted supplies, and brought forces to occupy Mỏ Hẻm again. We guessed that the troops reoccupying Mỏ Hẻm were mobile forces, and could not stay there for a long time. There would be another unit to replace them. Regiment 209 concentrated its forces to ambush on Highway 6 and used only part of its forces for the siege, obliging the enemy to withdraw and be destroyed. As we expected, on December 6, French troops pulled put of Mỏ Hẻm. When the enemy came near Chợ Bờ, our forces opened fire and immediately killed a lieutenant, a sub-lieutenant, and a section of avant gardes. Our troops assaulted the enemy, killing a great number of them. The remainder ran to Mỏ Hẻm with the intention of making rafts to cross the river but they were pursued and captured. After the report, I said it was an tactically important battle; the experience should be studied by other units.

At the end of December, Regiment 66 launched a massive attack and destroyed the Đầm Huống position. The puppet troops in Toàn Thắng and Cổ Lũng posts mutinied, killed their commanders and surrendered to our forces.

At the end of January 1950, Regiment 48 persuaded the defenses of Mát position to give up and to turn over all their weapons.

The Lê Lợi campaign ended in late January 1950. We destroyed part of the enemy forces, annihilated 10 enemy positions, obliged 13 others to withdraw, and developed guerilla warfare in the locality, thereby dealing a hard blow to the enemy plan to set up the autonomous Mường region. We broke the spirit of the Mường puppet soldiers. We had broken the enemy pressure on the west of Inter-zone 3, and opened the communication line between Việt Bắc and Thanh-Nghệ.

On the coordination battlefield, the Vietnamese volunteers, together with the Lao forces, destroyed the Xiềng Khọ positions, breaking the defense line from Xiềng Khọ to Sốp Hào, thereby expanding the liberated zone in Upper Laos.

2

Early in 1950, Việt Nam was recognized by a number of countries who established diplomatic relations with our country. China was the first, followed by the Soviet Union, Mongolia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Czechoslovakia, the Democratic Republic of Germany, Hungary, Rumania, Poland, Bulgaria, and Albania. The success of the Chinese revolution brought about favorable conditions for our resistance war. As the result of the Chinese success the encirclement of our country had been broken in the northern border. Beyond that border was continental China adjoining the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

The Standing Central Committee convened the 3rd National Congress from late January to early February 1950 in the resistance zone. The Congress was extremely well organized. Each delegate was carefully provided with a place in the conference hall and accommodations in dormitories. Entrusted by the Standing Central Committee, Trường Chinh would read the political report, I the military report, and Phạm Văn Đồng the administrative report. The assessment of the conference was that the Vietnamese position in relation to the enemy's was now stronger.

Our strength was in our morale, a weakness of the enemy. The enemy had strength in equipment and weapons. Our strong position needed to grow into even greater strength. By capitalizing on the weaknesses of the enemy, and strengthening our own position we would be able to shift to a counter offensive in 1950.

To that end, our military strength must prevail in the principal battlefield while in others, we could check the enemy. This prevailing military posture must be maintained and developed for continued counter offensive until complete victory.

The general counter offensive lasted throughout a strategic period under a general plan for the whole Indochinese battlefield. It

consisted of waves of counter offensives until the total defeat of the enemy and the total victory of the revolution.

In 1950, we needed to organize our counter offensive plans immediately.

On February 12, President Hồ Chí Minh signed the decree on general mobilization. All the human, material, and financial resources of the nation would be placed under the special legislation of wartime. For the sake of the nation and the resistance, the State was entitled to mobilize and use all the strength of the nation, in implementation of the motto: "Everything for the frontline, everything for victory."

An important immediate task was to break the French encirclement in the northern frontier and to eliminate their pressure on both sides of the Việt Bắc base region.

We had established diplomatic relations with China, the Soviet Union, and other brother countries, but the way from our country to the world was not yet opened. The French still occupied Lai Châu, Lao Cai, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Móng Cái. They still controlled all motorized transport lines to China. In reality, with their scattered military posts, they had never succeeded in closing our northern frontier. However, the paths through forests for pedestrians and horse riders did not facilitate quick and easy transport of international material aid.

Early in January, the Standing Central Committee issued an instruction to open the northwest campaign and to prepare the northeast battlefield. For the time being, the northwest was where the enemy was weakest and most vulnerable. Meanwhile the northeast was an important battlefield from now until the time when we would shift to an offensive stance.

The High Command decided to open an offensive campaign against the northwest, and at the same time, to step up the mobile-ambushes on Highway 4. The northeast was where the enemy

defense line was the most solid, controlling the railway and the land roads to China. We must smash this defense line to allow international exchanges. But preparations must be carefully done. In the spring and summer of that year, we actively prepared the battlefield of the northeast but for the time being we would not touch the system of enemy strong holds and military posts.

3

In implementation of the instruction of the Central Committee, the High Command ordered the opening of the Northwest campaign which was coded *Lê Hồng Phong campaign I.*

The campaign aimed at destroying enemy forces, and a number of their posts. The goal was at least to destroy their puppet troops; at most, the liberation of Lao Cai, which would open the way for international relations.

The principal direction of the campaign was Lao Cai, the subsidiary direction was Điện Biên Phủ and Sầm Nưa, the diversion direction was the checking of Sơn La.

The campaign command included Bằng Giang as chief commander, Song Hào as political commissar, and Cao Văn Khánh as deputy commander.

While we were preparing for the campaign, on the other side of the frontier, adjoining Lào Cai, the Chinese liberation troops had occupied Mông Tự, Hồ Kiều, and were going to control the area opposite Phong Thổ, Lai Châu. The French colluded with the remnants of the Kuomintang troops in consolidating the defense of the frontier.

In the principal direction, we attacked Phố Lu, a small town with two companies defending it as well as solid fortifications. The battle had critical and atrocious moments. After three waves of fighting lasting four days and nights, Phố Lu was overrun, the enemy was

annihilated, but our casualties were heavy. Some companies lost two thirds of their men.

After the campaign, I listened to the account of Vũ Yên, commander of the Regiment of the Capital City. Phố Lu was the sub-sector command post defended by a company of French troops, a company of Vietnamese puppet soldiers, and 80 local partisans. It was an important post remaining from the Thao river defense line after the summer campaign last year, blocking the road to Lao Cai town. Phố Lu was a small town that had not suffered war damage. It had rows of one- and two-story brick houses. The enemy had driven away all the inhabitants to build a solid stronghold. Around the town, there was a wall 1-2 meters thick, and at its four corners, four concrete bunkers to keep watch. Outside the wall, barbed wires and minefields were set up. Nearby the base was an airfield. The commander of the sub-sector considered Phố Lu an impregnable position.

The first two attacks were unsuccessful; our troops were stopped at the barbed wires fences. In the third attack, we concentrated all the artillery firepower in one direction, destroyed part of the wall, and opened a way for our troops to enter. The bazooka-man who accompanied the assailants silenced all the gun emplacements. The artillery men also pushed their guns inside the base and destroyed the pockets of resistance. The commander of Phố Lu was killed in battle, leaving behind a diary in which he had written: "Alas! Our enemy has the spirit of victors!"

In the secondary direction, the development of the battle was more complicated. Three assaults were launched against Nghĩa Đô without success. The enemy sent reinforcements from Hà Nội, but we continued to besiege it. The pressure was so strong that finally the enemy was forced to withdraw. After this battle we overran Bản Lầu and attacked a number of other positions.

The enemy parachuted reinforcements to Lao Cai, reoccupied Phố Lu and Nghĩa Đô. In view of the intense defense by the

enemy, the reduced fighting force of our soldiers, and the difficult food supply, the High Command decided to halt the campaign.

The French suffered heavy losses and were obliged to disperse the parachute troops, its strategic mobile forces, to cope with our offensives in the northwest. However, we also suffered casualties and did not yet reach the goals of the campaign. Fundamentally the situation of the battlefield had not changed.

After the review of the campaign, in my capacity as commander-in-chief and general political commissar, I wrote to the campaign command, pointing out the strong and the weak points of the Phố Lu and Nghĩa Đô battles. The letter read in part:

"A correct review is necessary to make progress and to avoid mistakes in the future.

"Earlier, I had severely criticized the Cầu Rầm battle. In 1948, I strongly criticized the Phủ Thông battle, which could not be called an annihilation battle. In 1949, I criticized the Lô river battle...

"The Phố Lu battle was different. We annihilated an important small town of the enemy, and seized enemy arms and ammunition. We praised examples of unparalleled heroism of officers and men. However, the fighting method resulted in heavy casualties, therefore it should be criticized, pointing out both strong points and weak points. The Nghĩa Đô battle must be called a failure. Political work should not stimulate the combatants to speak only of successes and good points; it should also point out failures and shortcomings for study and correction.

"I wish you victory. Always remember to make meticulous summaries of battles, especially after successes."

In 1949 and Spring 1950, small campaigns were successively opened in all fronts of the country.

The command of Inter-zone 4 with Nguyễn Sơn as commander and Trần Văn Quang as political commissar stood for "strong attacks against Bình-Trị-Thiên." In January 1949, Regiment 101, with Trần Sâm as commander and Trần Quý Hai as political commissar, ambushed a military train in Hói Mít, on the Đà Nẵng–Huế railway line which destroyed 80 tons of arms and ammunition and annihilated the company of escorting troops.

In August, our troops simultaneously opposed enemy sweeps and fought mobile-battles in Mỹ Chánh and Mỹ Xuyên, destroying a company of legionaries. This was a resounding victory of the Bình-Trị-Thiên forces on a plain terrain.

Early in 1950, the Bình-Trị-Thiên war front was established. Hà Văn Lâu was commander, Trần Quý Hai political commissar, and Trần Sâm deputy commander. The Lê Lai campaign was opened in south Quảng Bình, in coordination with the Lê Lợi campaign in Hòa Bình. A company of European and African soldiers were annihilated in Vạn Xuân, Thạch Xá Hạ. Many enemy positions were destroyed or forced to withdraw. Many areas in north and south Quảng Bình were liberated.

In June, the Phan Đình Phùng campaign was launched. The fighting method was flexible, now with concentrated forces, now with dispersed forces. The campaign developed guerilla warfare, liberating a number of villages in the plain, and expanding the south Quảng Nam guerilla base. Regiment 95 and Regiment 101 ambushed a convoy of over 100 vehicles going from Đồng Hới to Chấp Lễ, Hạ Cờ, killing over 300 enemies and destroying 40 military vehicles.

The command of Inter-zone 5 included Nguyễn Chánh as political commissar and Nguyễn Thế Lâm as acting commander. Late in 1958, a unit of Inter-regiment 80 and 83 with Lư Giang as commander, and Nguyễn Đường as political commissar, destroyed Phước Thuận post to the north of Ninh Hòa townlet. Thereafter, we destroyed the Trại Cá, Đại Điền Trung, Phú Khê,

and Phú Cốc strongholds. We sank the Admiral Vernon's vessel in the waters of Hòn Khói island, and killed a company of European and African troops on Highway 1 to the north of Vạn Giã townlet.

In early 1949, with Nguyễn Bá Phát as commander, and Nguyễn Quyết as political commissar, Regiment 108 laid ambushes on the railway and land road from Quảng Nam to Huế, damaging many trains and destroying many trucks and armored vehicles.

In Tây Nguyên, with Trương Cao Dũng as commander, in coordination with local armed forces Regiment 120 won many victories on highways 14 and 7. They established a large base area in the triangle Cheo Reo – Buôn Hồ – Mađrăc and along the north-south Highway 19 from west of Măng Giang pass to the proximity of Playku town.

Early in 1950, in Quảng Nam, with Đàm Quang Trung as commander and Nguyễn Đôn as political commissar, Regiment 210 destroyed a convoy and a company of legionaries in Thanh Quýt, and overran the Cẩm Lệ and Hòn Báng positions. Our troops ambushed three military trains on the Hải Vân pass, liberating a greater part of Duy Xuyên district and west of Đại Lộc district. They enlarged the guerilla base of Điện Bàn, Hòa Vang.

In Nam Bộ, after the criticism of "guerillaism" by the Party Committee of Nam Bộ, each zone built a main-force regiment. The command of Nam Bộ opened the Spring campaign, increasing activities in Trà Vinh, Mỹ Tho, and Sóc Trăng. They attacked the water and road ways, destroying many small enemy positions, intruding into small towns, forcing many enemy posts to withdraw. Zone 7 opened the Dầu Tiếng campaign. Meanwhile Zone 8 launched the Cầu Ngang campaign. Zone 9 destroyed or forced the enemy to withdraw from many posts. The enemy transport and

movement on the Sài Gòn-Lộc Ninh road was almost paralyzed. The movement on the river way to Vũng Tàu was also blocked after the sinking of a transport vessel on the Lòng Tàu River, 20 km away from Sài Gòn.

The political struggle movement in Nam Bộ, especially in Sài Gòn, was boiling. In the face of the "Bảo Đại solution" pursued by the French colonialists on order of the US, many strikes by factory workers, market vendors, and school and university students broke out. There was a general strike by eight large enterprises organized by the Sài Gòn Trade Unions. In the last days of November 1949 strikes by the students of many schools ignited a series of struggles.

The demonstration of the Sài Gòn students on 9 January 1949 demanded the release of the arrested people and was warmly supported by the citizens of Sài Gòn. Savage repression was ordered by the police, killing student Trần Văn Ơn and wounding tens of persons. Under the slogan "To sacrifice for the fatherland is to continue life after death, To live as a traitorous Vietnamese is a shame for ever," the funeral of Trần Văn Ơn on January 12 turned into a manifestation of strength reflecting the militant solidarity of the people, and made a resounding echo.

Many personalities, intellectuals, journalists, religious followers, and small traders took to the street. The workers of many factories, employees of government offices also joined the demonstration. Two delegations of students from North and Central Việt Nam flew to Sài Gòn in time to attend the funeral. Shops, schools, and factories were closed. Markets did not gather. Over half a million men went out for the demonstration. Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn had never staged such a large strike.

January 9 had become history and had become the official date to mark the struggle for national independence and unification of students all over the country.

The direct intervention of the US in the Indochinese issue became clearer and clearer. Griffins, ambassador of the US, arrived in Sài Gòn. Two US war vessels anchored at the city port. An aircraft carrier with 70 planes on board were prowling off the coast of Vũng Tàu to intimidate the Vietnamese people.

To manifest the opposition of our people to the US intervention, the Sài Gòn – Chợ Lớn Party committee supported a large-scale struggle. The Sài Gòn commandos threw hand grenades at the Continental Hotel, where the US ambassador was living. On the evening of March 18, when the American and the French were reveling on board a ship, the combatants of Battalion 950 fired mortar shells into the mooring place of the vessel.

On March 19, over 300,000 inhabitants of Sài Gòn – Chợ Lớn held a big demonstration. Lawyer Nguyễn Hữu Thọ,[92] together with other patriotic personalities and intellectuals of the city, headed the demonstration. Yellow-starred red flags were held high along the streets. US flags, French flags, the puppets' flags, and Bảo Đại pictures were torn to pieces. The people loudly shouted: "Down with US imperialism!" "US imperialists, go home!", "Down with puppet Bảo Đại!", "Long live President Hồ!" The demonstrators prevailed in the central part of the city from morning to noon. On the same night, the two US war vessels silently withdrew from the Sài Gòn port.

This was the first friction between the Vietnamese people and the US imperialists. With this demonstration, the people of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn, present-day Hồ Chí Minh City, had become forerunners in the anti-US movement in Việt Nam. Stemming from this historical event, March 19 has been considered the anti-US day by the whole people.

92. Later President of the National Front for the Liberation of South Việt Nam and Vice President of Việt Nam.

In response to a call of the Hà Nội's Party Committee, students opened a week of struggle. They observed mourning of the pupils killed in Sài Gòn. On January 20, in Quán Sứ pagoda Hanoians organized a solemn requiem for Trần Văn Ơn and his friends. On January 18, the fighters of Hà Nội attacked the Bạch Mai airfield, destroying 22 planes and set fire to 600,000 liters of gasoline. On January 21, when Bảo Đại and the US ambassador had just arrived in Hà Nội, 15 out of 42 electric transformation stations were destroyed. During the first days of March, 16 engines of the tramway enterprise of Thụy Khuê and a large ammunition depot in Đồn Thủy were also destroyed.

The struggle by the people of Hà Nội and Sài Gòn dealt strong blows to the headquarters of the enemy. It frightened and embarrassed the enemy and made the people more confident in victory and more determined in increasing the resistance.

4

On Highway 4, from the end of July 1949, the enemy abandoned many positions around Cao Bằng town. They strove to consolidate their military posts and increased the defense of the supply convoys. However, they could not avoid our ambushes.

At the beginning of September, at Lũng Phầy, Regiment 174 and Battalion 23 of Regiment 88 ambushed a convoy of over 120 vehicles going from Thất Khê to Cao Bằng, killing 200 enemies and destroying 90 vehicles.

In mid-September, at Lũng Vài-Bố Cùng, our soldiers attacked an enemy convoy bringing 800 troops from Thất Khê to Na Sầm, destroying 30 vehicles and killing many enemy troops.

In early October, Regiment 174 and Battalion 23 again ambushed a convoy of 100 vehicles, destroying 42 vehicles. They

also attacked the enemy and forced them to withdraw from two positions Bố Củng and Lũng Vài.

Summing up the war situation on Highway 4, the Operations Department reported that from Tiên Yên to Thất Khê, the terrain was open and not propitious for large-scale ambushes. The dangerous areas were all on the sections of Thất Khê - Cao Bằng. The French had carefully studied the battles waged by our troops and had taken stringent preventative measures. Each convoy was meticulously organized as a military operation.

At the crack of dawn, a battalion of Europeans and Africans opened the way from Thất Khê to Bông Lau pass, and occupied high mountain peaks. At Đông Khê, two infantry companies were also deployed around Lũng Phầy village, ready for rescue. The convoy started from Thất Khê only when the foraging units gave the signal "road is cleared".

However, the ambushes by our troops pounded the enemy continuously.

After the ambush in early October, commander of Regiment 174 Đặng Văn Việt was called to the High Command to report to me on the recent battles on Highway 4. After the account, I asked him how the regiment could stage ambushes several times on the same portion of road.

Đặng Văn Việt answered: "After each attack, the enemy changed their way of organizing the convoy, so our way of attack had to change accordingly. Each convoy certainly had vulnerable points, we had to hit them. If the enemy had no weaknesses, we had to create them!

"Over the past few months, the Regiment no longer ambushed in the old way, which was to hide troops on the side of the road and waited for the enemy to rush out and fight. The tactic of mobile-ambush battle was applied. Troops were hidden far from the road. They moved out to fight only when the opportunity came. The

secrecy principle was essential. Reconnaissance work, troop hiding, and signaling should not leave any trace that might cause suspicion to the enemy. In some cases troops were hidden for two or three days. Ambushing troops must have a keen sense of discipline and organization."

In the second half of May 1950, I was surprised to receive a message saying that the Đông Khê stronghold had just been neatly destroyed. It was a complete surprise. Đông Khê was an important base situated between Cao Bằng and Thất Khê, defended by a battalion minus a company of Europeans and Africans and a company of puppet troops. The defense formed a tight system on the promontories with solid fortifications. Regiment 174 was good at ambushes but it had never attacked a solid base. How could our troops annihilate Đông Khê with low casualties? On the other hand, Đông Khê was incorporated by the High Command in its coming autumn-winter plan when we would begin a large campaign. In this spring-summer, we would not attack the enemy posts on Highway 4. I had discussed this question only with Hoàng Văn Thái.

I sent a message immediately to Phan Phác, deputy chief of staff present at that time on Highway 4, and Đặng Văn Việt, Regiment 174 to return to the High Command for report.

I asked Phan Phác why the attack on Đông Khê was launched without the permission of the High Command. He said he had reported to the High Command a few days before attacking, but there was no answer, so he ordered his unit to attack. I saw that it was a matter of principle of asking for instruction, experience should be drawn.

Thereafter I listened to Việt's detailed report on the well-fought Đông Khê battle. For the first time we destroyed a stronghold having solid fortifications defended by a battalion of enemy troops. After the report, I praised the regiment for its progress, then I said

to Việt: "Please convey my regard to Chu Huy Mân and my praises to all the officers and men of the regiment."

The Đông Khê battle continued to obtain experiences of success and failure of the previous battles against strongholds. It was an attack on the enemy within solid fortifications, a typical battle of our army in the anti-French resistance war.

5

Early in 1950, Uncle Hồ went abroad.

He had long been a cadre of the Communist International. In his activities, he had always been associated with its movements and leadership. Before the August 1945 general insurrection, he went to China planning to find the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, through which to inform the Communist International of the intentions of our Party. This could not be done because on his way he was arrested by the Chiang Kai Shek administration. The Vietnamese revolution evolved in particular conditions. It had to apply special strategies and tactics for its existence, and develop within huge difficulties, having enemies at home and aggressors abroad. At one moment, our Party even had to declare its own dissolution. It was, as Uncle Hồ said, a "painful" measure that our Party was obliged to take. Then the nationwide resistance war broke out. Not only were our relations with the communist movement almost severed but our communication with the outside world was almost lost as well. The resistance war was coming to a turning point. We must report to the Communist International about the state of the revolution in Indochina in recent years. We must explain the changes in Việt Nam in order to win their assistance, and cooperation.

Before his departure, Uncle Hồ told me to make a report on the military situation. He said, you should write briefly, pointing out the

major questions. The recipient of the information would be Comrade Stalin. I submitted an eight-page report. After reading it Uncle Hồ said "that's all right."

It was a secret journey. French troops still occupied the frontier. In China the remnants of the Chiang Kai Shek troops were still present in many places in Hoa Nam. There would be long treks through forests and mountains. Nominally, this was a delegation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Việt Nam that came to meet the Communist Party of China. On the way, Trần Đăng Ninh would act as head of the delegation in contacting local officials.

Uncle Hồ had entered his sixties. Recently, he often felt unwell. Trần Đăng Ninh suggested making a stretcher for him. The logistics department created a special one, when a stretcher-bearer needed a rest he would not have to let the stretcher to the ground. Many improvements were added to the original idea. Knowing the fact, Uncle Hồ asked Trần Đăng Ninh:

"I'm told that you are making a palanquin for me, is it true?

"No, a stretcher actually, a provision in case you get tired.

"If I'm tired, you are also tired. If you are tired and still have to carry me, you will be all the more exhausted. Please prepare a rucksack for me; each of us will carry his own belongings. We shall move like soldiers."

The decision had been taken. Trần Đăng Ninh had to give up his plan of making a stretcher.

On the departure day, Uncle Hồ put on an indigo outfit, with a large-brimmed hat and a white towel to hide his beard. He carried a rucksack like all the other men in the delegation. Uncle Hồ seemed very happy. This travel would open new prospects for the resistance. Ten years had elapsed since he left the cradle of the October Revolution. He would meet again many of his comrades and friends.

During his absence, Phạm Văn Đồng would preside over the meetings of the Government Council. Uncle Hồ's absence worried a number of ministers. On this New Year Day, without his presence, the atmosphere of the central offices seemed to be less cordial. Western news agencies were suspicious; we didn't know from what source they got the information that President Hồ Chí Minh had gone to China, perhaps, and he had reached Moscow.

In the first half of April, learning that Uncle Hồ would soon return from abroad to the Office of High Command, we went to meet him at the edge of the forest. He was scrupulous in mainntaing secrecy. Comrade Cường, deputy chief of the secretariat of the general political commissars, was designated to go toward the 31st km of the Thái Nguyên - Bắc Cạn road to receive Uncle Hồ. Lest he should fail to recognize him, I told sister Hà to go with him. Approaching Quán Vuông, Cường and Hà saw that Uncle Hồ was walking quickly. The other members of his delegation were following one another at some distance as if they were pedestrians on the same route. Uncle Hồ recognized Cường at once and murmured to him: "Continue to go ahead for some distance more then return. Let sister Hà go with me."

His garments were the same as those he wore when he went abroad. He was a little thinner after three months of working outside the country. He remained one day at the High Command. He briefly told us about his stay in China and the Soviet Union. The following day, he left early to receive information and to prepare for the meeting of the Standing Central Committee.

In April, the Standing Central Committee met to hear Uncle Hồ talked about his mission abroad and to report to him the situation at home since the third national congress.

He had come to Beijing then to Moscow. Thanks to his visit, the leaders of the two friendly parties understood us better and promised to assist the Vietnamese resistance war.

In China, Uncle Hồ met Mao Tse-tung, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China for the first time. Chairman Mao was moved when Uncle Hồ spoke about the hard and heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people. Chairman Mao said that previously China had little condition to help the Vietnamese revolution, and promised to give strong assistance to our resistance. He advised us to build up our armed forces.

In the Soviet Union, Uncle Hồ met Stalin. The Soviet losses in World War II were extremely great. Twenty million men were killed, many cities reduced to ruins. However the Soviet economy had seen vigorous recovery. The Soviet Union was dealing with the cold war of the West by striving to strengthen its national defense. It had not understood clearly the situation of the Vietnamese revolution. After listening to Uncle Hồ's report, Stalin agreed with our Party's strategies and tactics over the past years. Militarily, Stalin advised us to pay attention to the whole western mountain region. The control over that region could mean the control of all the country.

In the evening, when all was quiet, Uncle Hồ appeared thoughtful, and said: "The Soviet Union criticized us for being slow in carrying out land reform. Stalin pointed at two chairs then asked me: "This is the peasants' chair, this is the land owner's chair, which one will be the seat of the Vietnamese revolutionary? We shall have to carry out land reform in the future. China has promised to help us with their experiences in building a peasant movement and in realizing land reform."

Uncle Hồ told us that in a working session, he saw a Soviet magazine on the table, and asked Stalin to sign it as a souvenir. Stalin readily signed the magazine and handed it to Molotov and Kazanovitch for their signatures as well. Uncle Hồ brought the magazine to the guesthouse, but the next day, it was no more there.

Uncle Hồ did not comment on this fact. The Soviet Union had recognized the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam but perhaps it was

still considering how much its close relations with Việt Nam should be publicized.

With regard to Soviet assistance, Uncle Hồ said that, in the immediate future, the Soviet Union would give us a regiment of anti-aircraft 37-mm guns, a number of Molotova trucks and medicine; China would arm a number of our infantry divisions and an artillery unit. They would convey Soviet aid to us. China would send military advisers to Việt Nam to disseminate the fighting experiences of the Chinese liberation army. They agreed that the school of ground forces would be transferred to Yunnan for training and upgrading our cadres. Uncle Hồ also recommended that roads in the north be regarded to facilitate receiving this assistance from our friends.

On the following day, the Standing Central Committee continued the meeting. Trường Chinh reported on the dissemination of the resolutions of the third National Congress and the general mobilization of our resources. I reported on the enemy's plans and actions in implementing the Revers plan; the results of a number of military campaigns; and the current situation in various battlefields.

The Standing Central Committee assessed that the dissemination of the resolutions of the third National Congress was very active. The majority of cadres, Party members, combatants, and other people were enthusiastic. However, there were still a number of mistaken perceptions about the general counter offensive which needed to be explained. The decree on general mobilization received a warm response and was eagerly accepted by the people, but the local authorities had made some errors, particularly in the free zone of Inter-zone 4.

Uncle Hồ concluded that the Standing Central Committee should issue instructions to explain more clearly the cause of the general counter offensive and to rectify the errors of the general mobilization. He would write letters for self-criticism and criticism

to Inter-zone 4. Trường Chinh would write articles to the *Communist Review* to clarify the Party's point of view.

A few days later, at a meeting of the Government Council, Uncle Hồ reported the strong support of China and the Soviet Union. He reminded the enthusiastic gathering: "The general counter offensive will be a long phase of the revolution. The material assistance from the Soviet Union and China in the form of weapons and equipments could reduce our difficulties, but the final victory will be decided by the efforts of our own people."

6

After the April meeting, the Standing Central Committee sent a note to all the local areas and propagation organs reiterating the necessity to continue explaning the general counter offensive in order to eliminate misunderstandings among the people. In order to shift the attitude of the people to general counter offensive, we must prepare with the greatest care. This would insure success. On the contrary, incomplete preparations would delay the shifting to general counter offensive, and make this more difficult.

Both China and the Soviet Union had experienced successful revolutions and they and other countries had recognized Việt Nam. Some believed we could ask our allies to come fight with us to defeat the French colonialists. As a result, they nurtured a spirit of dependence instead of developing their own efforts. Everyone must understand that the primary conditions of success were always our own efforts. The assistance of our friends was secondary.

Uncle Hồ wrote to the people of Inter-zone 4. In his letter, he criticized the cadres and self-criticized himself for errors in the work of general mobilization. The Standing Central Committee instructed Party organizations from Inter-zone to grassroots

echelons to read Uncle Hồ's letter. From his example and from his letter, cadres and Party members made self-criticism, understood their errors, and corrected themselves. Perceptions and working methods improved.

Some time later, Trường Chinh wrote two articles published in the *Communist Review*, continuing to guide the people's ideas regarding the general counter offensive: "Thorough Comprehension Leads to Effective Action--Complete Preparations for General Counter Offensive," and "Past and Future Work Leads to New Phase?" Their content was generally as follows:

"The general counter offensive is a hard and fierce process of struggle. We have had successes and failures, but the failures are less, successes are more. Failures are temporary, successes are decisive.

"We have the support and assistance of allied countries. But to win victory, first and foremost we have to depend on our own efforts. Our own efforts are fundamental, outside assistance is very important, but supplementary. We cannot be dependent on outside assistance. The allies will not bring troops to fight in our place.

"Over the past six months, we have not made enough efforts to secure a strong military position in the main battlefield; on most of the secondary battlefields, except some regions, we were not strong enough to overwhelm the enemy forces. Ideologically we were still seriously subjective, we still belittled the preparations for general counter offensive."

The Central Committee informed all the levels and localities that these two articles were considered instructions of the Central Committee.

7

In May, Uncle Hồ's birthday anniversary was drawing near. In the previous years, the Standing Central Committee proposed

to organize a birthday party, Uncle Hồ refused and composed a poem:

"Because of State affairs, family should not be thought of

Aged fifty nine years I am not yet old

Wait until the victory of the resistance war

Friends, you will celebrate my birthday anniversary"

During the resistance years, whenever May 19 came, the army and the people throughout the country strove to achieve military deeds in celebration of Uncle Hồ's longevity. However, in the central offices, only a simple gathering was organized. This year, Uncle Hồ turned 60. Many countries had recognized Việt Nam. Certainly there would be messages of congratulations from heads of States to the President of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam. We thought it was necessary to organize a solemn ceremony. Yet Uncle Hồ often refused our proposal during the meetings of the Standing Central Committee and the Government Council. Finally, in view of everyone's strong desire, Uncle Hồ accepted a plan for a reception. The deputies of the National Assembly, representatives from the government, from mass organizations, and from the army would attend the reception of the Government Council this May.

The organizing committee of the anniversary met several times to discuss the content of the event to make it solemn and significant. Many ministers accepted the invitation to perform at the soirée.

The meeting of the Government Council was fixed to be organized on May 21, two days after Uncle Hồ's birthday.

On that morning, when we arrived at the venue, Uncle Hồ was already there. He would receive the delegates at 16:30 hours. So, the organizing committee and the delegations had more time for preparation.

At the appointed time, all the delegates of the Party, the government, the mass organizations and the army gathered at the conference hall. The bamboo house in the heart of the forest was brightened by electric lights. The head of the organizing committee held in his hand a long program of formalities, and performances. However, when Uncle Hồ appeared, the program was no longer observed. He gladly talked with each delegate; he requested those whom he was meeting for the first time to introduce themselves. There were no long, solemn formalities, including the speeches of good wishes and praise that the delegations had prepared.

Uncle Hồ spoke about the new opportunity of the world and the Vietnamese revolution, about the difficulties our people were faced with because of the US increasing intervention in the Indochinese war after being driven out of the Chinese continent. We would, he said, try to secure international assistance, but the general counter offensive would be long and victory could be won with the tremendous efforts of our army and our people.

Taking advantage of a pause in Uncle Hồ's speech, Reverend Phạm Bá Trực from the Standing Committee of the National Assembly stood up and read his congratulations in Latin.

Uncle Hồ smiled and continued the Reverend's words:

"I have a few verses, as simple as maize and cassava, I wish to read them:

Sixty years old, I am still very young

As compared to Mr. Bành,[93] *I am but a child*

I am eating well, sleeping well, and working well

Living in this way on earth is in no way worse than living in fairy land."

93. A legendary personage noted for his longevity

The birthday anniversary of Uncle Hồ was full of intimacy and cordiality. The atmosphere was as warm as in a family, leaving a deep impression on everyone in the audience.

The next morning, Uncle Hồ met once more with the delegates and a photograph was taken of all of us. The military delegates had a separate talk with the president.

At 14:00 hours, the Government Council met under the chairmanship of Uncle Hồ. The gathering lasted until 2.00 a.m. on the following day. In the course of the conference, messages of military victories continuously came from various fronts as birthday presents to President Hồ.

"NOT A CONCLUSION..."

It is not yet time to address the causes of the war that no one believed would last 30 years. However, to review the five years of fighting under siege – if we count from the start of the nationwide resistance war, it was almost four years – we should try to understand why our young armed forces, armed with sticks, spears and swords, could oppose the French modern expeditionary corps in their second conquest of Việt Nam. We should understand why our army and people could not only stand firm but become stronger and stronger and finally smash the French scheme to seize our country once again by military means. The first phase of the war was of particular significance because, without it, the following phases of the war would not have happened.

The achievements of the five years of fighting under siege stem from the thousands of years of our nation's staunch struggle, from the spirit of independence and self-reliance of the Vietnamese people. Nguyễn Ái Quốc was the representative of this spirit at the beginning of the 20th century. His constant idea in all his revolutionary activities was that the people constituted the main and decisive force. He thought it was indispensable to organize, and to unite all Vietnamese in a broad, national, united, front. Workers, peasants, and intellectuals would be the core under the leadership of a genuinely revolutionary party. As he put it, to overthrow the enslaving rule of the imperialists, it did not suffice to kill some kings and mandarins. It could not be separate insurrections, but all the strength of the people must be mobilized and a general armed insurrection must break out at an opportune moment. The common people must be made conscious that losing

their national land was shameful; that the Lạc Hồng (Vietnamese) nation could not live poorly as slaves, that they must struggle to seize their national land; to seize independence and freedom, that they would rather sacrifice everything than lose their country and be enslaved. The people must understand that they could win by "the way of fighting of an oppressed people": guerilla warfare, the guerilla warfare of Việt Nam.

During the failure and the difficult days of the Nam Kỳ and the Bắc Sơn insurrections, together with the historical resolution on preparing the armed general insurrection, the Việt Minh (National United Front of Việt Nam) came into being in the mountain region of Pắc Bó in 1941. Villages, cantons, districts and armed guerilla groups whole-heartedly supporting the Việt Minh were formed and survived in spite of the white terror in Cao-Bắc-Lạng region. And the liberated zone with the liberation troops came into existence – the image of the future Việt Nam in miniature before the general insurrection. This was the premise of the people's, multi-sided, and long-lasting war. It gave confidence to the communists, about 5,000 in number at that time, that the national liberation revolution could win complete victory.

With the triumph of the August Revolution in 1945, twenty-five million Vietnamese throughout the country stood up as one person with an ebullient spirit in a historical moment, forming a huge political force of the whole nation. The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam came into being. The people's democratic State was based on that great national cohesion. It mobilized and organized our people to defend their newly secured independence and their sacred right to live and to pursue happiness.

Five years of fighting under siege evidenced the spirit, the resurgence, and the new life of a nation that had experienced centuries of bondage. We waged an all-people, all-sided war and we made great achievements in all respects.

I would like to point out here a great achievement of prime

importance. Our people and armed forces, under the leadership of our Party, gradually created the fundamental elements of a national defense and national liberation war by a people, whose land and whose population were small. This may be called the art of the Vietnamese people's war in Hồ Chí Minh's time—the art of people's war.

The all-people and all-sided character of the war was a great example of creativeness only possible under the leadership of a vanguard party. The character was clearly expressed in the simple and stimulating words of Hồ Chí Minh's appeal to all people to join the resistance war on 19 December 1946:

"Dear compatriots, we must stand up, whether we are men or women, old or young, regardless of religion, political faction, or ethnicity, if we are Vietnamese, we must stand up against the French colonialists, for national salvation. Whoever has a rifle should use his rifle, whoever has a sword should use his sword. Having no sword, let's use a pickaxe, a spade, a stick. Everyone must strive to fight the enemy for national salvation."

Two years before, in the instruction of 22 December 1944 on the formation of the propagation and liberation troops, he had spoken about a war by the whole people, the necessity of mobilizing the whole people and arming the whole people.

It was precisely with the art of waging war by the whole people, in the very first year of the resistance war, that we had smashed the strategic actions of the enemy, pushed the French colonialists' modern army into passivity, and foiled their scheme of re-conquering Việt Nam.

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It is impossible to get a correct assessment of a war if we look at it only from one side.

The responsibility and the interests of the parties involved in the war, the commanders' insistent demand that they achieve victory, obliged warring parties to conceal the truth, not only during the war but also after it ended. Fortunately, forty years have helped us overcome this difficulty. The French colonial conquest has become history. The records about the Indochinese war have been gradually made public. The study of historians over the past few years have revealed the internal situation of the opponent's throughout the war, and have facilitated the review of our corresponding views and policies.

During the Indochinese war, the successive governments of France were often criticized for lacking a clear-cut direction for the war. Now it is possible to see that the French government leaders during these years, from Charles de Gaulle to René Mayer, consistently intended to re-conquer the lost colonies, maintaining at any cost the three Indochinese countries in the form of an Indochinese federation under French control. Therefore, they could not make any concession to the Hồ Chí Minh government, which resolutely insisted on independence and freedom, but which made every attempt to find a peaceful settlement. The communists and the leftist socialists persevered and struggled for the agreement of 6 March 1946 to be respected and for negotiation with the Hồ Chí Minh government. They were always in the minority in the executive and legislative power of France. As for the large movement of progressive people in France opposing the dirty war, of course, it was ignored by the hawkish circles, even bluntly repressed sometimes. The only way for Vietnam was to take up arms to defend independence and freedom. It was a historic choice.

Considering itself an industrial great power having a modern army, the French imperialists believed that, although weakened after World War II, they could re-conquer Việt Nam by force, rapidly smash the young Vietnamese government militarily,

diplomatically, and financially. They thought that Việt Nam was under an illusion when it bravely opposed the French. This completely erroneous assessment led them to one failure after another throughout the war. For them, weapons could vanquish men, particularly when those opposing them were only guerillas, weaker than they themselves. Under-evaluating the strength of people struggling for independence and freedom is an innate property of imperialism, including US imperialism later.

At the meeting of the French general staff in Hà Nội, it was concluded that the so-called "government" and "army" were only Việt Minh deceptive notions. There were no regular troops of Việt Minh.

Now forty years later, French historians revealed an almost unanimous evaluation: "In early 1950, France had failed in its scheme to reconquer Việt Nam by military means, had been bogged down in an endless war, and could not become the victor."

The first five years of fighting occupied a special position in the modern warfare of national defense and liberation of Việt Nam.

The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam was surrounded on all sides, but it stood firm and grew up in war conditions. The new democratic regime brought about independence, freedom and the sacred human rights, which were more and more consolidated from the central to the grassroots levels and had a great effect on the resistance war. With progress in national defense know-how, the self-sufficient economy overcame innumerable difficulties to meet the requirements of the people and army in food and clothing. Education and public health received special attention. Illiteracy was eradicated. The population of liberated zones lived in a wholesome culture. Everyone, including the population of regions under enemy control, sympathized with the soldiers and hated the aggressors. They were resolute to carry out the resistance war till final victory. Such a rear area was an encouragement for the combatants to fight bravely on the battlefields.

From slaves who had broken their shackles to stand up empty handed, our people fought with intransigence with the enemy. After five years of war, the foreign invaders had fallen on dire difficulty and an insoluble dilemma. We had begun to prepare forces to deal decisive blows to the enemy, which they could not return.

We had waged an all-people, all-sided war and formed a state of the people, by the people, and for the people. Our people's war front spread from South to North, our armed forces had made progress in fighting thanks to the development of all three branches, of the armed forces. We had begun to organize military divisions.

These achievements and experiences not only testified to the spirit of self-reliance of the Vietnamese people, they also revealed the independence and self-control of the leadership of our revolutionary war, which was exemplary. They allowed us to shape a more adequate, correct, and creative war policy and a military direction. They enhanced the nation's spirit of sacrifice. We received support from brother countries, especially from China and the Soviet Union. We also received great approval and support from people throughout the world, including the French people. All these factors combined into a huge force using our strength and the strength around us to defeat the enemy.

The total victory of a war of national defense and liberation lasting thirty years was a great victory in modern world history. A small, former colonial and semi-feudal nation with a backward economy in the East defeated modern armies of two great Western powers. The achievements and experiences of our army and people during the five years of fighting under siege constituted the premises and the first basis of that great triumph.

NHÀ XUẤT BẢN THẾ GIỚI
46 Trần Hưng Đạo, Hà Nội, Việt Nam
Tel: (84-4) 8253841 - Fax: (84-4) 8269578
E-mai: thegioi@hn.vnn.vn

ĐẠI TƯỚNG VÕ NGUYÊN GIÁP

CHIẾN ĐẤU TRONG VÒNG VÂY

Hồi ức

HỮU MAI THỂ HIỆN

Chịu trách nhiệm xuất bản
TRẦN ĐOÀN LÂM

Dịch giả:	NGUYỄN ĐÌNH PHƯƠNG
Hiệu đính:	SHARON GMELSH
Biên tập:	PHẠM TRẦN LONG
Bìa:	LÊ VĂN THAO
Sửa bản in:	ANH TUẤN
Trình bày:	HOÀNG THỊ HOÀI

In 1000 bản, khổ 14 cm x 20,5 cm, tại Trung tâm Chế bản và In Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới. Giấy chấp nhận đăng ký kế hoạch xuất bản số 48-36/XB-QLXB cấp ngày 9/1/2003. In xong và nộp lưu chiểu Quý I năm 2004.

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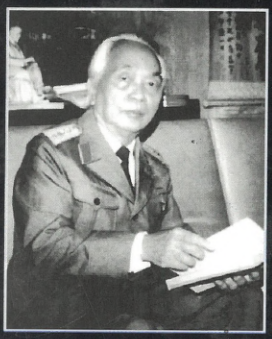

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